

"Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen."
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 170 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2025

Prisoners of the past

EVERY election in Meghalaya is another regression into the past as if the future is too daunting to contemplate. In December this year, Chief Minister, Conrad K Sangma while speaking at a college event informed that Meghalaya has only 6 lakh people above the age of 45 years. He was referring to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Jal Shakti which states that Meghalaya's population as of April 1, 2024 is 35.8 lakh. This means the state has over 29 lakh youth which works to about 80% of the population. This is a huge challenge for any state and calls for a comprehensive policy that will focus on outlining a futuristic roadmap and not election rhetoric that harps on the past and glorifies tradition as if the past has any bearing on critical issues such as the havoc wreaked by climate change because of rampant extractive mining. The past would have meaning only if there is a recognition and acceptance of past wrongdoings and a resolution to repair what was wrong and to abandon the path taken that has brought Meghalaya to where it is today. But will politicians ever admit past wrongs and resolve to adopt new and forward looking policies?

In the not so distant past coal mining took a toll on one of the most life-giving resources — the rivers. Two rivers in Jaintia Hills still carry the scars of acid mine drainage and are yet to recover and support riverine life. Studies have been conducted by NEHU and other scientists and remediation measures have been suggested but it ended there. Most rivers flowing through urban areas are facing the onslaught of urbanisation and encroachments but no one will make this an election issue because those about to get into the District Councils know that they don't have the wherewithal to deal with the situation even though rivers and their upkeep are the onus of the Councils. The rapidly dwindling forest cover in Meghalaya should have been the most talked about issue since the Councils are the custodians of nearly 94% of forests in Meghalaya. But these issues are frozen and only tradition, culture, and protection are the key words we will get to hear as the campaigning begins.

Psychology tells us that low self-esteem and self-doubt often go hand in hand with living in the past. When we don't believe in our ability to handle new challenges or create a better future, we may retreat to a time when things felt more manageable or when we felt more confident. It's a form of self-protection, but one that ultimately holds us back from growth and new opportunities. Is this not Meghalaya's eternal problem since it was created? The Councils live in a time warp as if they have nothing to do with creating sustainable development models when in fact mining and the elite capture of community owned lands are the brief of the Councils. Do they have a roadmap to put a stop to unsustainable mining practices? This earth will be inherited by the 80% youth population. What are they inheriting? An earth that's already heavily exploited? What resources do they have to work on for gainful employment? Do any of the wannabe councillors have a youth policy they want to spell out or will all of them go on the tried, tested and failed track?

Trump and Modi: Can they really be 'dear friends'?

By Rajdeep Sardesai

"Abki Baar Trump Sarkar," was prime minister Narendra Modi's rather effusive chant in September 2019 at an event in Texas where he warmly embraced and appeared to endorse US president Donald Trump. Few months later in February 2020, Modi and Trump were engaged in another hug-fest, this time at a massive 'Namaste Trump' gathering in Ahmedabad. Part mis-judgement, part over-exuberance, the Indian leadership found itself on the wrong foot when Trump unexpectedly lost the 2020 US presidential election. Instead it was a case of 'Abki Baar Biden Sarkar' in Washington DC for the last four years. Now, perhaps even more astonishingly, Trump is back, this time with an even bigger mandate. The question is, will the chemistry of 2019-20 be re-ignited between the two leaders?

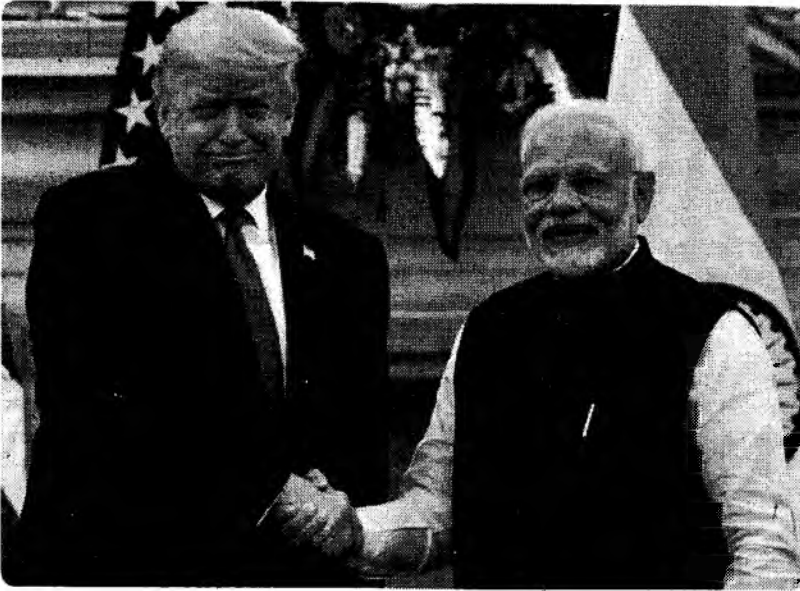
Mr Modi has called his US counterpart a 'dear friend' in a recent telephonic conversation. There has even been the suggestion that Modi and Trump are made for each other, two strongmen politicians with a flair for populist demagoguery and prime time showmanship. Their styles at times can appear strikingly similar, two leaders who understand the power of catchy slogans and artful soundbites. 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) has been Trump's calling card much like Modi has promised to create an 'Amrit Kaal' leading to a Viksit Bharat by 2047. For their vast army of cheerleaders, Modi and Trump represent the triumph of aggressive right-wing nationalism over the time-worn politics of liberal consensus. If Modi has struck at the Lutvans elite of a previous age, Trump has made the Capitol Hill establishment his primary target. The anti-immigrant rhetoric of Trump may resonate with Modi's supporters who have often demonized the Indian Muslim as the 'enemy within'. Trump's backers want to build border walls to keep out immigrants; Modi's army seeks to build temples over mosques. The search for a perpetual 'enemy' keeps their supporters engaged and enthralled.

And yet, let's not overstate the Trump-Modi parallels. Truth be told, their differences might actually outstrip their similarities. Their political trajectories

are very distinct to each other. Mr Modi has been in politics for half a century, the RSS pracharak who slowly but surely moved up the political ladder as part of the wider sangh parivar network. By contrast, Trump is a successful businessman first whose meteoric rise in politics has no space for existing hierarchies. Modi rose from within the BJP ranks, Trump

Modi has broadly stayed within a certain lakshmanrekha of political propriety. It is unlikely, for example, that the prime minister will tweet at midnight to take on a neighboring country.

By contrast, Trump seeks to routinely step well outside the norms of acceptable political behavior. A week into his tenure, the US president has already issued a string



captured the Republican Party as the quintessential 'outsider'. Modi fashioned himself as a Hindutva icon, Trump positioned himself as a deal maker in chief. Modi is driven by an ideological zeal,

of acerbic statements and executive orders that are designed to confuse, confront and challenge his opponents. Then, be it a run-in with the Colombian president on deporting immigrants or

Trump and Modi get along five years after their initial love-fest? Modi doesn't like to play second fiddle in any political equation while Trump doesn't like to share the arc-lights with anyone else. As a result, an element of one-upmanship is almost inevitable: there is a desire for the Indian leadership to assert itself at the political high table even as the US president is determined to bully one and all. This is an asymmetrical relationship: the United States remains a global power with the capacity to influence the course of events while India is an aspiring power, still fighting for greater recognition in global corridors. For Trump, India may appear a vast lucrative market but squarely within an 'America First' framework; for Modi, the hope remains that Washington will see us as a trustworthy strategic ally.

That Trump with typical bombast has referred to China and India in the same breath as "tremendous tariff-makers" should be a cause for some anxiety. This is a US president who has little time for diplomatic niceties or polite behavior. Instead, there is a deeply transactional core to the Trump worldview that won't be swayed by fine words or past friendships. In essence, Trump would like to do a deal with both Beijing and New Delhi at some stage but entirely on his own terms. The unalloyed self-interest means that there is little space for high principles of morality in any dialogue with the occupant of the White House.

Over the next few months, India may well therefore have to play a cautious wait and watch game. As a conciliatory gesture, Mr Modi may well like to remind the US president that in 2019 he had openly backed Trump's presidency. It is uncertain though what impact the past bonhomie will have on present equations. The problem is that the US president is like the Big Boss in a self-styled reality show. On this show, only one voice — his own — really seems to matter. The rest of the world, including India, are mere spectators for now, unsure of what the next act in this presidential soap opera will throw up.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. His latest book is 2024: The Election That Surprised India)

"Both leaders have woven personality cults around themselves, their propensity for self-love is inordinately high but where Modi is still part of his party machine, Trump seeks to disrupt and dismantle the political apparatus almost entirely."

Trump often by commercial instincts. Both leaders have woven personality cults around themselves, their propensity for self-love is inordinately high but where Modi is still part of his party machine, Trump seeks to disrupt and dismantle the political apparatus almost entirely. It is that instinct for disruption that makes Trump so dangerously unpredictable. In his decade in power, Prime Minister Modi has periodically tried to shake up the traditional rules of power politics, even occasionally attempting 'shock and awe' strategies to keep his opponents on the defensive. The 2016 demonetisation move was one such sudden attempt to ostensibly wage a 'war' on black money. But even while centralizing decision-making to a great extent,

with his Mexican counterpart on renaming the Gulf of Mexico, Trump wants to deliberately stir the political pot to keep his rivals on edge. The US president's uniquely individualistic style has no place for political correctness while Modi is far keener to gain wider acceptability. Notice, for example, how Modi sought to appropriate Mahatma Gandhi by selecting Gandhi's spectacles as the logo for the high-profile Swachh Bharat campaign. Or the conscious attempt to position himself as an inheritor of Sardar Patel's 'Iron Man' legacy. Trump has little or no connect with his country's past; his version of history appears to have only one show-stopper: his own self-image.

Which brings us to the original question: how will

Dip into divinity: The celestial splash of Kumbh Mela

By Satil Gewali

Metaphorically speaking, while Copernicus and Galileo were just beginning to play marbles in the playground of the solar system, Indian sages, many millennia earlier, were already playing football and hockey in the vast cosmic arena. These mystic seers of the East had long ago boldly asserted the existence of the multiverse and parallel universes, while also delving into the mysteries of time dilation.

The extraordinary knowledge of planetary motion, constellations and incredibly vast timescale held by the ancient sages of India bowled over renowned astro-scientists like Jean Sylvain Bailly, John Playfair, and Carl Sagan. What is most noteworthy is that their knowledge of celestial bodies and their influence on earth and human life enabled sages to calculate the timing of many significant events and festivities with amazing precision — Maha Kumbh Mela being one such example. Carl Sagan applauded the Indian knowledge of cosmology in his masterpiece - Cosmos — "Hinduism is the only one of the world's great traditions dedicated to the idea that the Cosmos itself undergoes an immense, indeed an infinite, number of deaths and rebirths. It is the only tradition in which the time scales correspond to those of modern scientific cosmology." (Chapter-10)

Of course, in India, sacred festivals are closely linked to the movement of planets and stars, which help decide the best time for important auspicious events and rituals. The Maha Kumbh Mela usually takes place every 12 years, but the 2025 event is particularly special, as such a rare planetary alignment happens only once in 144 years. This year's mega event in Prayagraj stands out due to the rare conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, the Sun, and the Moon, along with the auspicious Pushya Nakshatra (constellation). In this extraordinary celestial lining up, Jupiter resides in Aquarius (Kumbha), while the Sun and Moon align in Capricorn. This rare celestial meeting deepens the event's spiritual and astrological significance. It offers devotees and seekers a unique chance for inner transformation and a profound connection with spiritual phenomena.

Just as the alignment of the Sun, Moon, and Earth during a new moon creates powerful oceanic tides, this rare planetary alignment is believed to energize and purify the mind at the spiritual level. Therefore, for millions of devotees, the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela is far more than just a gathering — it is a sacred opportunity to take on austerities, align with the universe's eternal rhythm, and set out on a life-altering odyssey of self-reflection and personal awakening.

However, merely taking a dip at the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati does not in itself wash away one's inner impurities. True purification — especially from the effects of past impure actions — can only be achieved through, as mentioned in the scriptures, complete detachment from material comforts, the renunciation of worldly desires, and unalloyed meditation. This is why the practice of "Kalpavas" is recommended at this time. During Kalpavas, seekers engage in deep spiritual practices, embracing silence, self-discipline, and contemplation. In essence, Kalpavas represents the heart of the Kumbh Mela — a sacred path that transcends the physical plane. It allows one to experience the "divine" both within and beyond. It is also very important to note that this mass gathering at the SANGAM is deeply rooted in two profound philosophical principles — "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" and "Brahma Satya Jagat Mithya."

"Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," which means "the world is one family," expresses the Kumbh Mela's inclusive and universal essence. This ancient Sanskrit saying emphasises that, despite our apparent distinctions, we are all united in sharing the same DIVINE spirit. At the Kumbh, this idea comes to life as millions of people from various backgrounds join together, transcending caste, creed, language and nationality.

Another profound notion is "Brahma Satya Jagat Mithya" — "Brahman, SUPREMACY CONSCIOUSNESS, is the only real, the world is an illusion." This doctrine of the East later immensely influenced the writings of great thinkers like Arthur Schopenhauer, Ralph Emerson, D. Thoreau, TS Eliot and William Butler Yeats, including modern physicists. This philosophy invariably inspires one to look beyond the fleeting nature of our worldly existence and recognise the underlying eternal reality. This reinforces the idea that, despite the "impermanence" of material existence, an eternal spiritual essence unites every being.

An eminent Pakistan-born scholar from London, Khalid Umar, aptly remarks — "Indian spiritualism's understanding of humanity's relationship with the UNIVERSE, from vegetation (under our feet) to the stars (in the Milky Way), is evidence of the advanced knowledge in India, which has extra-terrestrial roots and connections. The meditating seekers' consciousness can reach frontiers beyond space and time, breaking the illusion of duality — of self and the universe."

The historic event in Prayagraj has attracted an unprecedented number of visitors from across the nation and around the world. However, amidst the spiritual fervour and joy a troubling issue has also emerged. Some overzealous electronic media reporters, with their microphones and cameras, have been polluting the sacred atmosphere of this holy pilgrimage. They intrusively run after pilgrims — especially those with beautiful faces, models, celebrities. It's as if these reporters think they're hosting "Kumbh Mela's Got Talent" instead of covering a sacred event and its higher purpose! Their questions often range from trivial personal details to sensationalized inquiries about the event, creating discomfort among the devotees and audience. Nothing is more disheartening than witnessing Westerners being asked a barrage of awkward questions. The administrative authorities should take strict measures to curb such intrusive reporting, which goes against the ethos of spiritualism. Yes, visitors, particularly from other countries, should not leave with an unpleasant impression of the festival or the nation.

Notably, among many other celebrities, Laurence Powell Jobs, the late Steve Jobs' wife, travelled to Prayagraj with her 60-member team and undertook a few days of Kalpavas austerity. Apple's co-founder had been inspired by ancient literature, and had expressed his deep desire to attend the Kumbh Mela when he was only 19. Steve Jobs wrote about his intention in a handwritten letter to his best friend Tim Brown, which was ultimately auctioned in 2022 for a whopping Rs. 4.32 crore.

In the boundless expanse of the cosmos, where planets move in their perfect rhythm and the universe keeps unfolding its mysteries, may the Kumbh awaken true seekers to search for the ultimate truth: beyond the changing world, for beyond the fleeting attachments and aversions, lies an unchanging reality — the eternal, the infinite, the divine!

Letters to the Editor

State of education in Meghalaya

Editor
The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 provides insights into the educational performance of various states, including Meghalaya and other North Eastern States. In Meghalaya school enrolment for children aged 7 to 16 remains strong, with a continued preference for government schools. On foundational literacy approximately 31.1% of Grade III students in government schools could read at expected Grade II level. As far as Arithmetic skills are concerned, only a small fraction of Grade V students demonstrated the ability to perform division tasks. When it comes to digital literacy, nearly 95% of surveyed households reported owning a smartphone, with a substantial number of children engaging in educational activities online. In arithmetic skills, both Meghalaya and Nagaland showed improvements, but Nagaland outperformed Meghalaya in foundational numeracy.

Pradesh faced challenges in improving reading proficiency. As far as digital literacy is concerned Meghalaya which reported a high level of smartphone ownership and usage for educational activities is a positive trend compared to other states. Overall, while Meghalaya has made notable progress in certain areas, there are still challenges to address, particularly in arithmetic skills.

In the ASER 2024 survey, Mizoram emerged as the best-performing state among the North Eastern States. When it comes to reading skills, Mizoram had the highest proportion of Class 5 children in government schools at 64.9% who could read a Class 2 level text. There has been a significant improvement in basic arithmetic skills, with a notable increase in the percentage of children able to perform subtraction. The overall performance indicates that there has been a substantial gain in both reading and arithmetic skills, reflecting the effectiveness of educational interventions and policies implemented in the state.

According to the ASER 2024 survey, the states that performed the best in terms of learning outcomes in the country are Kerala with consistently high perfor-

mance in both reading and arithmetic skills. Himachal Pradesh with significant improvements in foundational literacy and numeracy. Punjab with a notable progress in reading levels and arithmetic skills. Uttar Pradesh with a remarkable recovery in learning levels, especially in government schools. Maharashtra with a steady improvement in both reading and arithmetic skills. Odisha significantly gained in foundational literacy and numeracy. There has been an impressive improvement in reading levels among primary school students in Haryana and there has been a sharp rise in reading and arithmetic skills in Uttarakhand. These states have shown significant progress in improving learning outcomes, particularly in foundational literacy and numeracy.

Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Whither Smart City?

Editor,
The street lights in municipal areas have not been functioning for months. The maintenance work for street lighting is ostensibly carried out by the Smart City Project (as informed by the MeECL)

who are impossible to contact. Can we have a functioning toll free number or any contact number for citizens' complaints? Then we have cables of varying kinds strung carelessly all over and in some cases are dangling precariously over the roads. This in Lower New Colony endangers motorists climbing up that steep road. Can this be taken care of?

Then we have a lot of new speed breakers being installed which is a welcome step but can we have them suitably identified by being painted in stripes? Also, can a decent footpath be in place along the Laitumkrah market area so one can walk without fear of injury to life and limb?

Smart city we may be but the basics need to be functioning in the first place.

Yours etc.,
G Shabong,
Shillong-3

CM's direct connect with citizens

Editor,
I thank the Chief Minister for addressing the public live via press conferences. This daring governance plan, which elevates Adam Smith's invisible hand over

all other natural laws, serves as a model. Through this decision, not only is the Chief Minister reaching out to the people of the state, but he is also strengthening the relationship between the government and citizens by establishing greater trust through transparency.

In an era of rapid disinformation, nothing is more essential than direct communication between the leader and the people. The conventional walls between governance and the populace allow for speculation, misinterpretation and even mistrust. The Chief Minister's real-time interaction with citizens will leave no room for doubt regarding government policies, decisions, and actions. This initiative is a hallmark of responsible and responsive leadership — the kind that is not afraid to come under public scrutiny but welcomes it.

Besides delivering accurate information, these live press conferences foster a sense of inclusivity. Availability is the foundation of democracy, allowing for feedback and ensuring equal representation. This gives citizens the assurance that their concerns, opinions, and voices are valued in shaping the future. This means that such engagement will promote civic

participation — citizens will be aware, engaged, and invested in government policies and programs.

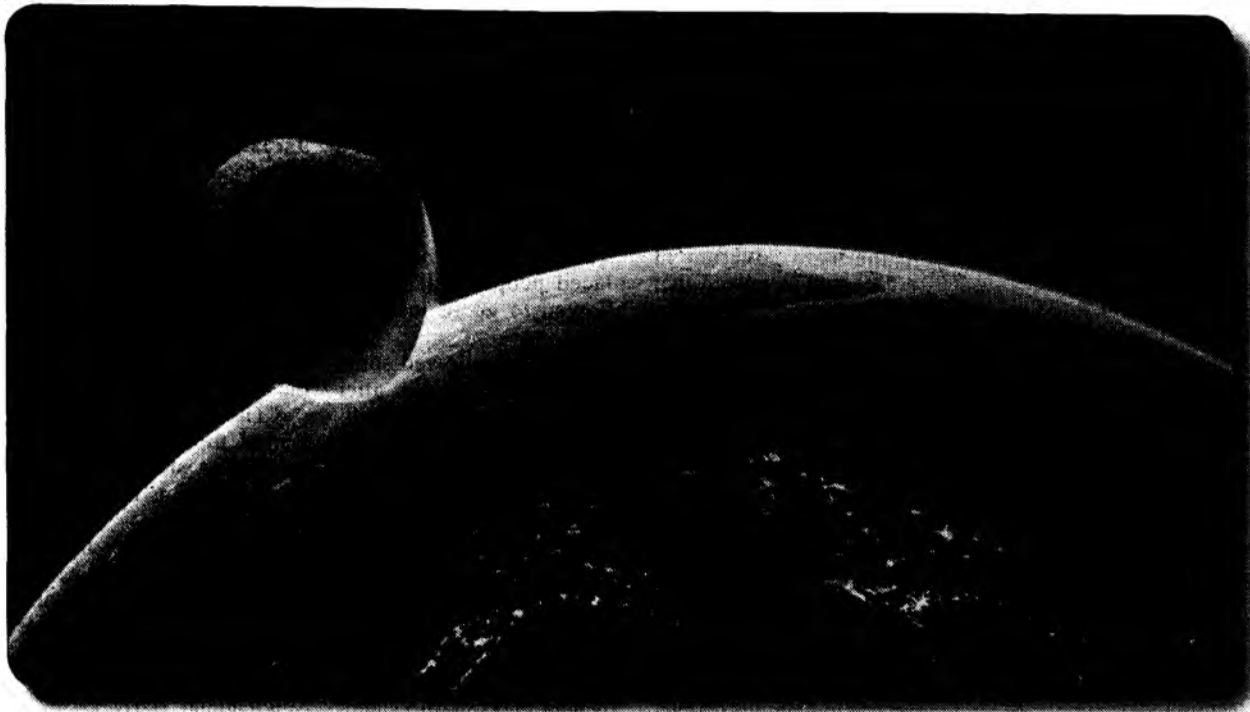
This program provides a superb model for other leaders to emulate. Transparency in leadership is still a challenge, even in many democracies. The Chief Minister's open engagement should inspire others to follow suit, ensuring governance is accessible to the people and not confined to inefficient government offices.

Hope this practice continues as people need more interaction with their representatives where citizens are no longer just listened to, but citizens will have to listen and engage with their representatives to open a discussion in themselves. The foundation of any strong democracy is an informed citizenry, and initiatives like this lay the groundwork for a more engaged and informed populace. This type of leadership fosters confidence and strengthens the foundation of democracy.

Yours etc.,
Teresa Phawa Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

Astronomers have spied an asteroid that may be heading for Earth; here's what we know so far



On 27 December last year, astronomers using the ATLAS survey telescope in Chile discovered a small asteroid moving away from Earth.

Follow up observations have revealed that the asteroid, 2024 YR4, is on a path that might lead to a collision with our planet on 22 December 2032.

In other words, the newly-discovered space rock poses a significant impact threat to our planet.

It sounds like something from a bad Hollywood movie. But in reality, there's no need to panic - this is just another day living on a target in a celestial shooting gallery.

So what's the story? What do we know about 2024 YR4? And what would happen if it did collide with Earth?

A target in the celestial shooting gallery

As Earth moves around the Sun, it is continually encountering dust and debris that dates back to the

birth of the Solar system. The system is littered with such debris, and the meteors and fireballs seen every night are evidence of just how polluted our local neighbourhood is.

But most of the debris is far too small to cause problems to life on Earth.

There is far more tiny debris out there than larger chunks - so impacts from objects that could imperil life on Earth's surface are much less frequent.

The most famous impact came some 66 million years ago. A giant rock from space, at least 10 kilometres in diameter, crashed into Earth - causing a mass extinction that wiped out something like 75% of all species on Earth.

Impacts that large are, fortunately, very rare events. Current estimates suggest that objects like the one which killed the dinosaurs only hit Earth every 50 million years or so. Smaller impacts, though, are more common.

On 30 June 1908, there was a vast

explosion in a sparsely populated part of Siberia. When explorers later reached the location of the explosion, they found an astonishing site: a forest levelled, with all the trees fallen in the same direction. As they moved around, the direction of the fallen trees changed - all pointing inwards towards the epicentre of the explosion.

In total, the Tunguska event levelled an area of almost 2,200 square kilometres - roughly equivalent to the area of greater Sydney. Fortunately, that forest was extremely remote. While plants and animals were killed in the blast zone, it is thought that, at most, only three people perished.

Estimates vary of how frequent such large collisions should be. Some argue that Earth should experience a similar impact, on average, once per century. Others suggest such collisions might only happen every 10,000 years or so. The truth is we don't know - but that's part of the fun of science.

More recently, a smaller impact created global excitement. On 15 February 2013, a small asteroid (likely about 18 metres in diameter) detonated near the Russian city of Chelyabinsk.

The explosion, about 30 kilometres above the Earth's surface, generated a powerful shock-wave and extremely bright flash of light. Buildings were damaged, windows smashed, and almost 1,500 people were injured - although there were no fatalities.

It served as a reminder, however, that Earth will be hit again. It's only a question of when.

Which brings us to our latest contender - asteroid 2024 YR4.

The 1-in-77 chance of collision to watch

2024 YR4 has been under close observation by astronomers for a little over a month. It was discovered just a few days after making a relatively close approach to our planet, and it is now receding into the dark depths of the Solar system. By April, it will be lost to even the world's largest telescopes.

The observations carried out over the past month have allowed astronomers to extrapolate the asteroid's motion forward over time, working out its orbit around the Sun. As a result, it has become clear that, on 22 December 2032, it will pass very close to our planet - and may even collide with us.

At present, our best models of the asteroid's motion have an uncertainty of around 100,000 kilometres in its position at the time it would be closest to the Earth. At around 12,000 kilometres in diameter, our planet falls inside that region of uncertainty.

Calculations suggest there is currently around a 1-in-77 chance that the asteroid will crash into our planet at that time. Of course, that means there is still a 76-in-77

chance it will miss us.

When will we know for sure?

With every new observation of 2024 YR4, astronomers' knowledge of its orbit improves slightly - which is why the collision likelihoods you might see quoted online keep changing. We'll be able to follow the asteroid as it recedes from Earth for another couple of months, by which time we'll have a better idea of exactly where it will be on that fateful day in December 2032.

But it is unlikely we'll be able to say for sure whether we're in the clear at that point.

Fortunately, the asteroid will make another close approach to the Earth in December 2028 - passing around 8 million kilometres from our planet. Astronomers will be ready to perform a wide raft of observations that will help us to understand the size and shape of the asteroid, as well as giving an incredibly accurate overview of where it will be in 2032.

At the end of that encounter, we will know for sure whether there will be a collision in 2032. And if there is to be a collision that year, we'll be able to predict where on Earth that collision will be - likely to a precision of a few tens of kilometres.

How big would the impact be?

At the moment, we don't know the exact size of 2024 YR4. Even through Earth's largest telescopes, it is just a single tiny speck in the sky. So we have to estimate its size based on its brightness. Depending on how reflective the asteroid is, current estimates place it as being somewhere between 40 and 100 metres across.

What does that mean for a potential impact? Well, it would depend on exactly what the asteroid is made of.

The most likely scenario is that

the asteroid is a rocky pile of rubble. If that turns out to be the case, then the impact would be very similar to the Tunguska event in 1908.

The asteroid would detonate in the atmosphere, with a shockwave blasting Earth's surface as a result. The Tunguska impact was a "city killer" type event, levelling forest across a city-sized patch of land.

A less likely possibility is that the asteroid is made of metal. Based on its orbit around the Sun, this seems unlikely - but we can't rule it out.

In that case, the asteroid would make it through the atmosphere intact, and crash into Earth's surface. If it hit on the land, it would carve out a new impact crater, probably more than a kilometre across and a couple of hundred metres deep - something similar to Meteor Crater in Arizona.

Again, this would be quite spectacular for the region around the impact - but that would be about it.

Living in a remarkable time

This all sounds like doom and gloom. After all, we know that the Earth will be hit again - either by 2024 YR4 or something else. But there's a real positive to take out of all this.

There has been life on Earth for more than 3 billion years. In all that time, impacts have come along and caused destruction and devastation many times.

But there has never been a species, to our knowledge, that understood the risk, could detect potential threats in advance, and even do something about the threat. Until now.

In just the past few years, we have discovered 11 asteroids before they hit our planet. In each case, we have predicted where they would hit, and watched the results.

We have also, in recent years, demonstrated a growing capacity to deflect potentially threatening asteroids. NASA's DART mission (the Double Asteroid Redirection Test) was an astounding success.

For the first time in more than 3 billion years of life on Earth, we can do something about the risk posed by rocks from space. So don't panic! But instead, sit back and watch the show. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 2, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon conjunct Venus on your solar return chart ensures a very favorable year ahead. This is a very beautiful combination. Moon represents creativity, our intellect and inner feelings while Venus stands for everything beautiful in our lives. This will be amply visible in your case. This year you will be ambitious and plan to achieve something big in your field of work. Those in media fashion, writing and other creative fields will make good name and also receive national / international awards and recognition. Money inflow will be continuous. You could also get involved in a passionate love affair with a very charming person. It could end in marriage ties. You will undertake a lot of business related trips and come in contact with the high and the mighty.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You will take action, plan ahead and seize opportunities. You would eagerly throw yourself into learning and gathering information. A travel, publishing, creative, or educational opportunity falls into your lap. Personal relationships are in focus. A tussle between time spent with loved one or children, and time spent with friends or group activities, is likely to pull you in different directions. Your responsibilities might interfere with your social life. Be able to find a way to strike a balance between self-gratification and the obligations of daily life.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This is an excellent phase for budget-making, asking for a raise, and discovering new ways to boost your income. You would organize your personal finances. It's an excellent time to present your ideas, state your case and get up to date with your emails, phone calls and communication. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus help you to achieve what you set out to do in domestic and professional life during the coming phase.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This planetary configuration is an excellent combination for negotiations, marriage, and business partnerships. Expansion, confidence, and hopefulness are keywords at this time. People are bound to recognize your leadership skills and talents. It is a friendly time, when it is easy to enjoy life and the company of other people. Focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends and exploration. A new project begun has a good chance of being successful and long-lasting. A loved one is paying a lot of attention to you, and it feels fabulous.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) The position of stars indicates that you are feeling good about yourself and confident about your future. You're more likely to enjoy your increased exposure and recognition on a professional level. Increased responsibilities continue to be an issue in your life, but you feel more in control. The way you present your ideas, certainly helping to smooth over differences in your personal relationships. You are thinking more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion and warmth. You may visit relatives and family friends. Meditation and inner focus lift you to higher levels of consciousness.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) This is an outstanding period for work, money and career. This is a time for growth and development. Finances, taxes, and intimacy are main themes. You are inspired and could even inspire others with your words. The desire for action and adventure may impel you to travel or to undertake a challenging enterprise. You want your objectives to reflect what you're really about, and you are likely to rid yourself of unsatisfying goals. A sudden job opportunity or money and property matters could be part of the financial gains. Your physical activities tend to be more intense, passionate and focused.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) As the planetary configuration brings unusualness and curiosity in your relationships you feel they are more important to you now. It's an excellent time for travel, hobbies, higher education, communications, and learning. You are instinctively starting a new phase in your life. Disputes over shared resources, joint finances, or anything

which you hold in common with another are more likely and you are prone to impulsiveness and recklessness regarding such matters. It would be much better for you to go solo right now rather than attempt a cooperative endeavor. Your health and vitality are quite good, and you need physical outlets for your energies now.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You are likely to be actively involved with teamwork and collaboration with others. You are taking on new responsibilities, but generally enjoy the challenges. Concerns about your career, work, long-term goals and life direction, reputation and public image, and professional issues arise now. You are more perceptive and sensitive and easily affected by what is going on in your environment, particularly the feelings and emotional currents of the people around you. Being at home or in a comfortable, supportive atmosphere feels best.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This period brings good financial returns. Your desire for comfort, security and privacy is stronger now and spending some quality time with your family or by yourself at home is satisfying. If mishandled, however, you could be argumentative, stressed, and hell-bent on having your way. Avoid taking extreme measures to make things happen your way, and avoid people who might be doing same. Also, sharing and comparing your spiritual, religious, or philosophical interests with a friend or loved one may open up a whole new dimension of your relationship.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) New horizons in your romantic and love life open up. You may also wish to enhance your personal appearance in some way, such as getting a new hair style or purchasing clothing, cosmetics, and the like. Social gatherings are also very positive for you now. You might enjoy favourable outcomes when it comes to legal affairs, education, and travel. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. At this time you are inclined to invest your time and money into making your environment more beautiful and comfortable.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Domestic or family matters are emphasized by the planetary combination. You need not over-analyze personal relationships but rather respond with your heart and deep feelings and a new understanding and maturity with others around you at home and work. Simple activities such as washing your car, putting your home in order, maintaining your yard, or attending to your wardrobe give you a sense of satisfaction and security. You are a peacemaker since harmony in your environment seems more important than ever. Loving relationships, giving and receiving affection, and attracting people into your life who are good for you are very likely at this time.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This phase brings mixed results. You feel more comfortable with the way your relationships are right now. You seek out and receive assurance from family, old friends and allies. Also, your emotions are more intense and you may overreact to some encounter. You can emerge from this period with more compassion and sensitivity toward loved ones, once you free yourself from being too dependent upon them. Inner harmony and a sense of flowing along comfortably with events and people are accentuated now. Concern over health, diet and nutrition, putting your life in order, and self-improvement is also important this week.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) Your career, social standing, or reputation is favored at this time, especially by making personal contact with superiors or by socializing and making friendly contacts at work. Now is also a good time to enhance your public standing and to create good will with the public. Your desire for comfort, security, and privacy is stronger now and spending some quality time with your family or by yourself at home is satisfying. This is a time for going within to replenish yourself in order to meet the challenges and stresses of your usual activities. Domestic and family matters are emphasized at this time.

Babies as young as 4 months can tell how sounds of different languages are made

Babies are like little detectives, constantly piecing together clues about the world around them. If you've ever noticed your baby staring at you while you talk, it's because they're picking up on more than just sounds - they're learning how those sounds are made.

A recent study, published in *Developmental Science*, shows this amazing process starts as early as four months old, shaking up the old belief that babies learn these patterns only after tuning in to their native language between 6 and 12 months of age.

It also gives us an earlier window to help children who might be at risk of speech or language delays.

Sorting through a buffet of sounds

By their first birthday, babies are already fine-tuning their ears to the sounds of their native language in a process called perceptual attunement. Think of it like their brain sorting through a buffet of sounds to focus on the ones that matter most.

But in their first six months, babies can tell apart sounds from languages they've never even heard. For example, they might distinguish certain Hindi contrasts that are challenging for adult English speakers or identify unique tones in Mandarin, even if they're growing up in an English-speaking household.

This incredible ability doesn't last forever. Between six and 12 months, babies start narrowing their focus to the sounds they hear most often. For vowels, this fine-tuning kicks in at around six months while consonants follow at closer to ten months.

Think of it as babies zooming in on the sounds that matter, such as the difference between the "r" and "l" in English, while losing sensitivity to sounds they don't hear regularly.

Until now, researchers thought this narrowing process was needed for babies to start learning more complex language skills, such as

figuring out that the "b" in "bin" and the "d" in "din" differ because one is made with the lips and the other with the tongue tip.

But the new study found babies as young as four months are already learning how sounds are physically made, long before this narrowing begins.

Learning mini-languages

Here's an example to picture this. Imagine you're listening to someone speak a language you don't know. Even if you don't understand the words, you might notice how their lips or tongue move to make sounds. Four-month-old babies can do this too.

To demonstrate this, researchers conducted an experiment with 34 babies, aged four to six months, whose parents had provided consent to participate. The research team created a "match-the-pattern" game using two made up mini-languages.

One language had words with lip sounds like "b" and "v", while the other used tongue-tip sounds like "d" and "z". Each word, like "bivawo" or "dizalo", was paired with a cartoon image - a jellyfish for lip words and a crab for tongue-tip words. A recording of a word was played at the same time its paired image was shown.

Why cartoons? Because babies can't exactly tell us what they're thinking, but they can form associations in their brains. These images helped the researchers see if the babies could link each mini-language to the correct picture.

After the babies learned these mini-languages and their picture pairings, the researchers mixed things up.

Instead of hearing the words, the babies watched silent videos of a person's face saying new words from the same mini-languages.

In some videos, the face matched the cartoon they had learned earlier. In others, it didn't. The researchers then tracked how long the babies looked at the videos - a common method researchers use to see what

grabs their attention. Babies tend to look longer at things that surprise or interest them and shorter at things they find familiar, helping us understand how they process and recognise what they see.

The results were clear: babies looked significantly longer at the videos where the face matched what they'd learned. This showed they weren't just passively listening earlier - they were actively learning the rules of the mini-languages and linking that knowledge to what they saw.

Connecting the dots

In simple terms, this means four-month-old babies can connect the dots between sound and sight. This early ability to spot patterns in how sounds are made is the foundation for learning language later on. It's like their brains are already laying the groundwork for saying their first words.

This discovery changes what we thought we knew about babies' early language learning. It suggests babies start figuring out patterns at four months, well before they begin perceptually attuning to the sounds of their native language between six and 12 months.

That opens up exciting new possibilities for helping children who might struggle with speech or language. If we can help earlier, we might make a big difference.

These findings raise several interesting questions.

For example, can babies learn other differences such as voicing - whether a sound is made with a buzzing vibration, like the difference between "b" (buzzing) and "p" (no buzzing) - as early as four months? How does growing up in a bilingual home affect this ability?

Could babies use this skill to learn patterns in entirely new languages?

By exploring these questions, we'll keep uncovering the amazing ways babies' brains set the stage for learning one of the most complex human skills: language (*The Conversation*)

"The only source of knowledge is experience."

—Albert Einstein

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 172 SHILLONG, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2025

Nirmala's indulgences

A 'luring' budget for the salaried middle class; a shock to many; and a disappointment to other sectors across the board. The Union Budget 2025 presented by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman in Parliament for the eighth consecutive year on Saturday was lack-lustre and grossly undercut national interests. Yet the Modi-led government won laurels with a lavishly crafted bouquet of tax reliefs for the middle-income group, principally the white collar employees in both government and private sectors. A closer look at the budget proposals would shock one.

For instance, the government would be losing over Rs 1 lakh crore in taxes on account of the tax exemption scale being stretched from the present Rs 7 lakh to Rs 12 lakh and more on earnings for the middle class. This is no small sum. The railway sector would get just Rs 2.52 lakh crore; which is short by Rs 10,000 crore compared to last year. For the agriculture sector, the allotment is Rs 1,71,437 lakh crore. A claim is that the government would get back a certain percent of this lost income from the tax the middle class pay for purchases they do with the new savings. This, prima facie, sounds ludicrous. If money circulation in market is the government's aim to boost the economy, it should have taken different steps. It is appalling that some 95 per cent of the population of 1.4 billion has been excluded from the tax bracket. The Modi government's outreach to the salaried class is believed to be prompted this time by the approaching assembly polls in Delhi — the seat of the bureaucracy. The lavishing of funds for Bihar too in the last as well as the present budget, and for Andhra Pradesh, was obviously prompted by the coalition compulsions. The 2024 parliament poll verdict weakened the hands of Modi; and both Nitish Kumar and Chandrababu Naidu are demanding their pound of flesh.

The deep hit the exchequer takes -- on grounds of tax relief to one and all -- could be explained by the failure of the government to reduce allocations for several sectors or not increase the funds for even key sectors like the railways and the defence. There is a surprising reduction of 10,000 crore for the railways compared to last year. The increase in track length since 2014 is just 10km per day, on average, while the highway sector saw a three-fold increase. The rural employment guarantee scheme, which helps the poor, too did not get any increase. The funds were cut for the PMAY by 55 per cent; hurting the poor. Worse, at this critical time in defence, the allotment for it is less than two per cent of the GDP. The budget presentation itself lacked clarity in several aspects and was more of a smokescreen. There is too little about the railways. The dignity of the Union Budget is largely lost.

Letters to the Editor

Does Meghalaya need Article 371?

Editor,
Apropos of the news "VPP faces UDP, Congress fire for 'big talk' on bringing Article 371" (ST February 1st 2025), the architect of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution James Joy Mohan Nichols Roy, a member of the Congress Party played a crucial role in drafting the provisions that provide for administration of tribal areas in Northeast India. Hence, we have the Sixth Schedule in the districts of Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao and Bodoland in Assam. The Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills in Meghalaya. The Tripura tribal areas in Tripura and in the Chakma, Mara and Lai region of Mizoram.

JJM Nichols Roy advocated for the Sixth Schedule instead of Article 371 because he believed in the importance of self-governance for the tribal areas in the northeastern region. The Sixth Schedule provides for the establishment of an Autonomous District Council with legislative, executive and judicial powers, allowing tribal communities to govern their own affairs. Nichols Roy emphasized the need to preserve the unique cultural practices and social norms of the tribal communities. The Sixth Schedule

allows these communities to make laws and regulations that reflect their customs and traditions. It grants significant legislative powers to the ADCs, enabling them to manage land rights, social customs and local governance. This level of autonomy was seen as essential for the development and preservation of tribal identities. Nichols Roy believed that providing autonomy to tribal regions would help integrate them into the broader Indian framework while respecting their distinct identities. The Sixth Schedule was designed to balance autonomy with national integration. Roy opted for the Sixth Schedule because it offered a more suitable framework for self-governance, cultural preservation and balanced integration for the tribal communities in the northeastern region.

Why did Ladakh propose to be included in the Sixth Schedule rather than Article 371. Ladakh has a predominantly tribal population which is more than 97% and the Sixth Schedule is specifically designed to protect the rights and interest of tribal communities of Ladakh. It also provides for the formation of the Autonomous District Council with legislative, judicial and administrative autonomy, allowing for preservation of Ladakh's unique cultural heritage. The Sixth Schedule grants significant autonomy to tribal areas, al-

lowing them to govern their own affairs through ADCs. This level of self-governance is seen as essential for addressing their unique needs and challenges. The Schedule also ensures that the tribal communities have control over their land and resources, which is of crucial concern for the people of Ladakh. Ladakh's strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia gives it immense geopolitical significance for which the tribal leaders and the people of Ladakh feel that the Sixth Schedule can help ensure the region's unique identity and their interests are protected. However, the Government of India indicated that including Ladakh under the Sixth Schedule would be difficult, as the Constitution is clear that the Sixth Schedule is for the northeastern states only. For tribal areas in the rest of the country, there is the Fifth Schedule. The proposal for Ladakh to be included in the Sixth Schedule is driven by the need to protect its tribal identity, ensure local governance and address the region's unique cultural and geopolitical significance.

Merely shouting from the roof top or in the market place that Meghalaya needs Article 371 will not suffice because there is a process. The process for a state to get special provisions under Article 371 involves several steps and requires both political and legislative actions.

The steps to get Article 371 provisions requires the state government or representatives to identify the unique needs and challenges that require special provisions. The state government submits a proposal to the central government, outlining the specific provisions and justifications for special status. The Central government then reviews the proposal and assesses its merits. This will involve consultations with various stakeholders, including state representatives and experts.

If the Central government agrees with the proposal, it drafts the amendment to the Constitution to include the special provisions for the state under Article 371. Then the proposed amendment is introduced in Parliament. It must be passed by both houses of Parliament with a two-thirds majority. Once the amendment is passed by Parliament, it is then sent to the President of India for assent. Upon receiving the President's assent, the amendment becomes part of the Constitution of India. For instance, Article 371A was introduced for Nagaland after a 16-point agreement between the Central government and the Naga People's Convention in 1960, which led to the creation of Nagaland in 1963.

This process ensures that the unique needs and challenges of the state are addressed through constitutional provisions, promoting

social, economic and cultural development. The duration for the process to grant special provisions under Article 371 can vary significantly based on several factors, including the complexity of the proposal, the level of political consensus and legislative process. Since there is no fixed timeline experts estimate that the process can take several months to a few years depending on the factors referred to above. However, there are factors influencing timeline. 1. The level of political consensus and support for the proposal can significantly impact the timeline. If there is broad support, the process may move more quickly. 2. The legislative process, including debates and discussions in Parliament, can affect the duration. Complex proposals may require more time for deliberation. 3. Administrative procedure and consultations with stakeholders can also influence the timeline. In the case of Nagaland, the introduction of Article 371 A involved negotiations and agreements over a few years before it was enacted.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Is the State PWD blind and deaf?

Editor,

I guess we should be thankful for small mercies. On February 2, 2024, I had written to The Shillong Times about the digging up of the stretch of road from Motphran to Them Bijoij which has not been repaired for over two years. Now, the powers that be have finally woken up and after putting the public to numerous unnecessary hardships, they have finally gravelled and topped it with bitumen.

I guess 3 years is but an insignificant moment in the eons of time, and I presume that it is even lesser in the corridors of power, but nevertheless, I, as an inconsequential member of the public would like to express my endless appreciations and thanks to the almighty government for having finally heeded to my request and completing this minor work on a major thoroughfare, which has been hindering the safe passage of the public.

I only hope and pray that they are as swift as this in taking care of other such issues faced by the public at other locations.

Yours etc.,
Sarad Bawri,
Via email

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

Challenges before the ADCs

By H H Mohrmen

There is a section of the population in the state that is in favour of implementing Article 370 in Meghalaya. They are of the opinion that Article 370 of the Constitution is much more powerful and effective in protecting tribal rights and interests. They argue that the implementation of this article would benefit the state and its people significantly. It would better protect tribal rights and interests, making the community better off compared to the current Sixth Schedule. However, this article will not delve into that debate, as it is a foregone conclusion. The need of the hour is to assess whether, after 75 years since the adoption of the Constitution, this important part of the Constitution has truly served its purpose.

National Integration: The ultimate goal

The need to protect tribal rights and interests was debated extensively in the Constituent Assembly. It stressed the importance of preserving the unique culture and self-governance system of tribal communities while simultaneously emphasizing the need to bring them on par with the rest of the country. The ultimate goal was national integration, and it was agreed that the Sixth Schedule was the most relevant legislation to achieve this objective.

The state is at a very critical juncture; it is at the crossroads and before electing members to represent them in the various Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), the question that people must ask is: Have the ADCs fulfilled their twin roles of protecting the unique identity and culture of the people while also preparing them for full integration into the nation? **Protecting and preserving culture in changing times**

The first question is about safeguarding the unique culture and interests of the people. Have the ADCs fulfilled the purposes for which they were instituted? There is a saying that the only constant in the world is change. Like everything else, tribal culture and practices evolve over time. In such a situation, the ADCs have two primary responsibilities: one is to preserve dying traditions for posterity, and the other is to help cultural aspects that remain relevant to evolve with changing times. In Jaintia hills many traditions have either disappeared or are gradually fading away, such as the Longhai of the War Jaintia people and the Pastieh of the Raid Ialong and many others. Have the ADCs taken any meaningful steps to preserve these fading tribal traditions?

Cultural and traditional changes often occur due to external influences, such as religion and media. Dominant cultures tend to overshadow tribal traditions. In such a situation, what steps have the ADCs taken to protect and preserve tribal culture? Very unfortunately, the less said about the role of the ADCs in this regard, the better, because all three ADCs in the state have failed miserably in this aspect.

First major failure of the ADCs

Many people have forgotten that Lower Primary (LP) School education in the state was once under the purview of the ADCs, with LP schools generally known as DCLP schools. Few have questioned why the State Education Department took over the responsibility of managing LP schools from the District Councils. Perhaps this was the first major failure of the ADCs, as they had to relinquish control over primary education to the state government.

The second major failure of the ADCs is regarding the collection of royalties from minerals extracted from their respective areas. It must have been an embarrassment for the ADCs when the state government took over the responsibility of collecting royalties from both major and minor minerals, which were previously collected by the ADCs. Once the state took over this responsibility, it also altered the revenue-sharing ratio. Now, the state not only receives the lion's share of the revenues, but the government disburses the ADCs' share of the royalty at its discretion and in a piecemeal manner. Why did this happen? Your guess is as good as mine.

Overstaffing in the ADCs

The two ADCs in the state have frequently been in the news, though for all the wrong reasons. Surprisingly, now regional media have even stopped covering the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC). Among the three ADCs, two have consistently made headlines because their staffs have gone unpaid for months, sometimes even a year. What were the reasons for the staffs not being paid their salaries? The answer is quick and simple. It is because the ADCs are overstaffed. While the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) employs around 700 staff members, the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC) and GHADC have nearly double that number. It is now obvious why KHADC

has no problem with paying their staff's salary on regular basis.

This issue will persist unless both the ADCs and the state government acknowledge the problem and take decisive action. No amount of royalty revenue released by the state government will be sufficient because the Councils' income and expenditures are grossly disproportionate. The pressing question remains: Who will address this issue? Will the new Executive Committees in these ADCs dare to reduce staff numbers to solve the problem once and for all?

Unintentional bribery of ADC staff

It is unfortunate that, due to irregular salary payments, ADC staff often receive additional payments from the public for services rendered. This situation has reached a point where, out of pity for the unpaid staff and the necessity of completing tasks such as land surveys for land-holding certificates, the public feels compelled to pay them extra. In Jaintia Hills, apart from the mandatory fees for various Council services, people frequently pay additional amounts to staff members because they do not receive their salaries on time. In essence, the public is forced to supplement staff wages because the Executive Committee has failed to ensure timely salary payments.

Major sources of ADC revenue

The ADCs in the state have only a few major sources of revenue. The primary source is royalty collected from major and minor minerals, which the state government collects and disburses to the councils at its discretion. Other revenue sources include professional tax collected from employees in various sectors, license fees for issuing trading permits to non-tribals, market fees from traditional and modern market establishments (malls and single roof's multi-products and multi-brand markets), and road tax shares from the government. Obviously the Councils' revenue streams are very limited.

The ADCs' inability to maintain financial records

As a former member of the State Level Audit Advisory Board (2019-2020) constituted by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, I had access to financial reports from various state departments. During one board meeting, I was shocked to learn that the GHADC and JHADC had not balanced their books of accounts for

years. Financial reports from the two ADCs were not tabled because the ECs of these two Councils have not been able to reconcile the accounts. The JHADC even required a professional officer from the AG office to help reconcile its financial records. It remains unclear whether their financial situation has improved, but it is deeply concerning that the ADCs have struggled to maintain proper accounts.

Failure to protect rivers and water bodies

Another example of glaring failure of the ADCs is their inability to protect rivers and water bodies, which are vital to the people. Rivers fall under the jurisdiction of the District Councils, yet they have failed miserably in their duty to safeguard these resources. The rivers in the state are polluted and there are encroachments on the river in spite of court orders which prohibit construction on the banks of the river. Additionally, ADCs are responsible for appointing traditional heads such as the Syiem, Daloi, Rangbah Shnong, and Waheh Chnong. However, there have been cases where traditional leaders were appointed and removed arbitrarily by the ADC Executive Committees.

ADCs and the decline in tribal trade

The ADCs are mandated to issue trading licenses to non-tribal residents only for trades that tribals cannot undertake. However, ADCs have failed in their duty to protect tribal trade by granting licenses to large market companies that sell a wide range of products, from the smallest items to the most significant goods required by consumers. Issuing license to these mega shopping bazaars, has drastically affected the business of small traders who sell clothes and grocery items.

The ADCs have evidently failed on many fronts. The question remains: Are voters aware of these failures, and will this influence how they vote in the ensuing election to the ADCs? It is hoped that the voters this time will vote beyond party lines, regional, clan and religious affinity but instead vote to safeguard the interests of the tribals of Meghalaya and the ultimate development of the state in general.

Conclusion: The challenges before the ADCs are multifarious and of a huge magnitude. While their intended purpose is to safeguard tribal rights and culture, their numerous failures raise serious questions about their efficacy. The electorate must decide whether these Councils have exercised their mandate and vote responsibly to ensure that they fulfill their responsibilities effectively.

Mylliem Constituency left orphaned

By Kenny Jyrwa

For nearly a year now, Mylliem has been left orphaned by its so-called elected representative. Since March 9, our MLA has been missing—not in the literal sense, but in spirit, in action and in responsibility. What we are witnessing is not just political negligence; it is a full-scale abandonment of duty, a blatant betrayal of public trust, and an insult to the very essence of democracy.

When the people of Mylliem cast their votes, they were not just marking a ballot—they were placing their hopes, their struggles and their future in the hands of an individual they believed would represent them with integrity, dedication and vision. But what has happened since then? Nothing. Silence. Neglect. Our representative has all but vanished, treating the mandate given to him as nothing more than a symbolic victory, rather than a solemn obligation to serve.

This is more than just political failure—it is an outright mockery of the people of Mylliem. It is a slap in

through government-aided schemes. The former MLA is not a 'saviour,' but he is the kind of representative a constituency like Mylliem deserves.

For the incumbent MLA, there is no excuse for this level of incompetence. Old age could be a factor, or perhaps he simply does not care or no longer wishes to serve.

The lamenting tears and the victim card does not make a representative a Leader, because true leadership is about action, about standing with the people, about being visible and accessible at all times.

To have an MLA who vanishes for months on end is worse than having no MLA at all. At least with an empty seat, there is no false hope, no illusion of representation. But, luckily all hope is not lost for the people of Mylliem as there are leaders who still have the courage to lead, the courage to stand for the people in need be it in the frontline or the silent help, the people of Mylliem knows who these silent saviours are who when

"In just a span of two years, the former MLA has brought multiple indoor stadiums to the constituency, widened roads in almost every locality, facilitated the construction of infrastructure, and promoted self-employment through government-aided schemes. The former MLA is not a 'saviour,' but he is the kind of representative a constituency like Mylliem deserves. For the incumbent MLA, there is no excuse for this level of incompetence. Old age could be a factor, or perhaps he simply does not care or no longer wishes to serve."

the face of every voter who believed in the democratic process. It is an unforgivable betrayal of the very foundation of governance. How can an MLA, who holds the sacred duty of being the voice of the people, be so indifferent to the suffering, needs, and aspirations of those who put him in power?

What does it mean to be an MLA?

It is not just a title or a privilege to travel in a tinted expensive XUV or the privilege to blast the siren when stuck in a traffic jam. It is not just a position of power. It is a commitment—an unbreakable contract between the leader and the people. It means being present. It means listening, responding and taking action. It means bringing development, addressing grievances in and out of the four walls of the Assembly and ensuring that the people are not forgotten. But in Mylliem, the MLA seems to just love the media attention and play his victim card.

Despite holding office, our MLA is absent in every conceivable way. No leadership, no engagement, no initiative. The Constituency remains plagued by countless unresolved issues—deteriorating roads (which ironically was solved by the former MLA and the government in power), poor school infrastructure, the list goes on and on. But the big question remains - Where is our MLA when we need him the most?

In just a span of two years, the former MLA has brought multiple indoor stadiums to the constituency, widened roads in almost every locality, facilitated the construction of infrastructure, and promoted self-employment

approached will never hesitate to stand, speak and help the needy.

When his party members decided to leave and join hands with the government, was it a wrong move? Politically, it may have been seen as unethical, but in reality, it was a win for the people. The three who left did not do so for personal gain or ambition; had they sought cabinet positions, their intentions could have been questioned. Instead, they demanded real development—better roads, a C&RD block office, school buildings, and colleges.

Yet, ego prevailed over leadership. Our MLA chose to cling to his seat, even when it brought no value to the people. True leadership is about making difficult but necessary choices for the greater good, not about holding on to power for personal pride or stubbornness.

Had he made the right decision then, Mylliem could have been a different story today—more development, more opportunities and a better future for its people. But now, all we are left with are BUTs and IFs—missed opportunities that could have changed the fate of Mylliem.

The time for patience is over, people are frustrated. The time for action is now as the upcoming KHADC election is near. Mylliem deserves better.

And lastly, let us not forget—the MLA who has been missing for a year is still our serving MDC. Just a reminder, in case we have forgotten.

(The writer is a concerned voter of Mylliem Constituency)

"When you have expectations, you are setting yourself up for disappointment."

— Ryan Reynolds

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No.173 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2025

Dorbar Shnong versus VPP

THE Dorbar Shnong that took a decision to have a common platform for all candidates have obviously done so after taking into account the noise and inanity that election campaigns have come to signify. Common platforms allow each candidate to list out his manifesto and appeal for votes based on it. The people have had enough mud-slinging by different candidates without demonstrating a roadmap for better governance in the Autonomous District Councils and also by pointing out past ills and how those will be remedied. Unless candidates have meticulously studied the past failings of the ADCs how do they envisage to bring about changes in their governance models? These discussions are more meaningful than the noise minus substance. In a sense the Dorbar Shnong are proposing a more interactive type of campaign rather than a one-sided lecturing that is disparaging towards fellow candidates. It is high time to change the campaign strategies and the Dorbar Shnong are well within their rights to decide what is in the larger interests of their residents. Those good old days of hiring buses to take supporters from one campaign site to another as a show of strength is unnecessary bluster. Now is the time to get real and get down to brass tacks. People have been fooled enough in 50 years. Now they need to see action on the ground based on the mandate provided in the Sixth Schedule.

The State of Meghalaya never had and still does not have a land use policy which is integral to the equitable development of the State. Land lies at an important intersection between different competing values and priorities. Decisions about how land is used—and who controls that use is crucial to tackling major issues of climate change, biodiversity loss, social division, food insecurity, energy insecurity, amongst others. The ADCs, if they are sincere about conserving community land and not watch idly as such lands get bartered away to an elite group of tribals, should actually push for a cadastral survey. The ADCs should have used the cadastral survey as a tool for laying claims on land now under dispute with Assam. But the idea of a cadastral survey seems anathema to the political class, more so since it will expose which minister and MLA/MDC owns how much land. A glimpse into the affidavits filed by MLAs and their spouses on real estate ownership would shock many.

When land is the only investment it is natural that the affluent would indulge in land purchase but that's at the cost of the poor who have now been reduced to landlessness. That this should happen in a tribal society shows the extent of the problem. If the ADCs cannot even tackle this basic social inequity then are they really addressing the needs of society and checking the erosion of community ownership of land? If not, all other issues are peripheral.

Letters to the Editor

Harnessing youth potential

Editor,
The editorial "Prisoners of the past" (ST 1st February 2024) made interesting reading. Mahatma Gandhi said, "The past belongs to us, but we do not belong to the past. We belong to the present. We are makers of the future, but we do not belong to the future," this reflects his philosophy of living in the present and taking responsibility for shaping the future. This quote emphasizes the importance of learning from the past without being bound by it and focusing on the present to create a better future. Gandhi often spoke about the need for continuous self-improvement and the importance of taking action in the present to bring about positive change. This quote encapsulates his belief in the power of the present moment and the role individuals play in shaping their destiny. This is more important for the youths of today. The definition of "youth" can vary depending on the context and organization defining it. A commonly accepted age range for youth is between 15 and 24 years. This definition is used by organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization. As of the latest available data, the youth population in Meghalaya aged between 15 and 24 years is approximately 2.97 million or 29.7

lakhs as the editorial have rightly put it.
According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted from July 2023 to June 2024 by the National Sample Survey Organization, Government of India the unemployment rate in the Himalayan states of Nagaland is 7.8%, Jammu and Kashmir 6.7%, Meghalaya 6.6%, Manipur 6.5%, Arunachal Pradesh 6.5%, Himachal Pradesh 6.2%, Ladakh 5.6%, Uttarakhand 4.9%, Assam 2.6%, Mizoram 2.4% and Tripura 1.8%.
This youth unemployment in Meghalaya at 6.6% translates in absolute terms to 1.96 lakh unemployed. The youthful demographics of Meghalaya are quite promising. With over half of the population under 30, the state has significant potential for growth and development. This young population can drive innovation, entrepreneurship and economic progress. However, it also means that there needs to be a strong focus on education, skill development and job creation to harness this potential effectively. Leveraging Meghalaya's youthful population for growth involves several key strategies.
1. Education and Skill Development: Investing in quality education and vocational training programs to equip the youth with skills needed for the job market. This includes promoting STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathe-

matics) education and digital literacy.
2. Entrepreneurship and Innovation: Encouraging entrepreneurship by providing support for startups, including access to funding, mentorship and incubation centers. Creating an environment that fosters innovation can lead to the development of new industries and job opportunities.
3. Job Creation: Promoting industries that have the potential to create a large number of jobs, such as tourism, agriculture and manufacturing. Developing infrastructure and policies that attract investments in these sectors can help generate employment.
4. Healthcare and well-being: Ensuring access to quality healthcare services to maintain a healthy workforce. This includes preventive healthcare, mental health support and addressing issues like malnutrition.
5. Infrastructure development: Investing in infrastructure such as roads, transportation and digital connectivity to support economic activities and improve the quality of life for the population.
6. Youth Engagement: Involving young people in decision-making processes and governance to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are addressed. This can lead to more inclusive and effective policies.
7. Sustainable Development: Promoting sustainable practices in industries

and communities to ensure long-term growth without depleting natural resources. This includes initiatives in renewable energy, waste management and conservation.
By focusing on these areas, Meghalaya can harness the potential of its youthful population to drive economic growth and development.
Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Governance Unfiltered: The Future of Transparent Leadership

Editor,
It's about time we witness a governance model that doesn't hide behind closed doors but instead steps into the public arena—raw and real. I'm absolutely loving this change! Sangma's decision to address the people of the state through live press conferences on Facebook, surrounded by our journalists, is nothing short of revolutionary. This bold move disrupts the age-old tradition of opaque leadership and places the power of truth directly into the hands of the people.
In a world where misinformation spreads like wildfire—especially online—Sangma's willingness to speak directly to the masses

is the ultimate antidote. No longer can shadowy figures behind desks and hidden basements dictate false narratives. This is transparency on steroids, and boy, am I impressed! With every word spoken and every question answered in real-time, the air of distrust surrounding governmental decisions begins to lift. In an age of political theatrics and smoke-filled backroom offices, this is not just refreshing; it is essential and revolutionary.
We have long suffered the consequences of a disengaged government and disillusioned citizens. Governance has been reduced to a game of whispers, speculation, and half-truths. But today, we have a leader who shuns the podiums of silence and welcomes the scrutiny of a public that deserves to be informed. This is leadership at its finest—unafraid, unfiltered, and unapologetically transparent.
But let us be clear: it's not just about broadcasting policies; it's about reshaping the relationship between the people and their government. This is not a one-way street where we sit passively, listening to speeches that leave us empty, confused, or even more in the dark because of political hidden agendas. This is about interaction—real interaction—where citizens are not just bystanders but active participants in shaping the future of their society. It is time for us to engage as responsible citizens, demand more, hold

our leaders accountable, and never again accept being left in the dark. Say 'NO' to nodding our heads like sheep. Be an awakened, informed, and educated citizen. The choice is yours.
To every other leader still hiding behind the veil of bureaucracy and politics: take note. This is how it's done. Sangma has shown us the way forward—a path where governance is not confined to the stagnant halls of power but pulses through the very streets and hearts of the people. It is time we break free from the outdated, inaccessible political games of the past. This is the future of leadership: accessible, open, and accountable.
Let us make sure this moment does not slip through our fingers. Citizens must stand up—not only to be heard but to listen, to question, and to demand more. The foundation of any thriving democracy is the active participation of its people. Conrad K. Sangma has laid the foundation—will we pick it up and keep the momentum going? It is time for us to engage, because this is democracy in its rawest, most powerful form.
Yours etc.,
Bahunlang Pde,
Via email

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

World Cancer Day, February 4th, 2025

Does Meghalaya need the PET CAT?

By Dr. Caleb Harris M.Ch

Around this time last year, following the Meghalaya Cancer Conclave, there was a news report in the Shillong Times describing the event, wherein some cancer survivors had shared their experiences. One of them shared how she had to seek treatment outside the state as 'Meghalaya did not even have a PET CT'. I was intrigued by the reason for making the long journey to a distant state, to a crowded hospital, stretching all resources—all for a test which is not even used for diagnosis, but for 'staging' the cancer.

The PET CT has caught the attention of the public, probably because of the deft marketing of this scan as the 'one stop' test for cancer, when in reality it is not. The Computer Aided Tomography (CAT) scan or CT scan has been used to study the internal organs of the body for long but the images are in varying shades of grey and need trained eyes to interpret them. The radiologist is a doctor who has acquired a postgraduate degree specialising in interpreting such images, but many doctors who deal with various diseases have a fair understanding of these scans. As a cancer surgeon, I read these images myself and discuss with our radiologist to understand certain nuances. However, the official report is prepared and signed by the radiologist, which is essential for medicolegal purposes.

While the CT scan helps us understand the 'anatomy' (the structure of the human body) and the abnormalities, it has limitations in helping us understand the functional aspects. In order to improve the information obtained from CT scans, a (contrast) dye is injected through the veins while the CT images are acquired by the machine. This helps to delineate the organs better and can give insight into the functioning of certain organs. In the liver, the Contrast-enhanced CT scan can help us to diagnose certain conditions without even the need for a biopsy.

Cancerous cells of the body grow very fast and have more nutritional requirements than their normal counterparts. This is visualised by the Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scan,

which shows these areas as possessing 'hypermetabolic activity'. The PET scan is usually fused with a CT scan so that the best of both is made available. However, it is not only cancerous cells that show hypermetabolic activity. All infectious conditions, including tuberculosis, also show such activity, thereby confounding the results. In a country like India, with a high prevalence of tuberculosis, this leads to a lot of confusion. Hence PET CT is advised only for those cancers wherein research studies have shown proven benefit.

I remember treating a patient with early stage breast cancer who went to some other centre and got a PET CT done. This result showed that there was a small 'lesion' (anomaly which needs to be characterised further) in the lungs. Being too small to be characterised further, she was operated upon and subsequently received chemotherapy too. She later came to us for follow up visits and would always be concerned over whether that lesion would be cancerous disease. Some other patients have had to undergo biopsy from lymph nodes near the heart as a PET CT showed some anomaly which was later found to be normal.

There are certain cancers, such as lung cancer, wherein if surgery is planned, it would be beneficial to undergo a PET CT. In such cases, we explain to the patients and advise them to travel to Guwahati to get this done, but this may not be absolutely essential in many cancers. However, it is common, especially in the metropolitan cities of India, to find patients walking into the consultation rooms of oncologists with PET CT reports. This has led to mushrooming of PET CT centres, the only positive being the competitive pricing, with the cost coming down to that of a CT scan.

So if not by a PET CT, how then is cancer diagnosed? The good old way, as I've known, is by clinical examination, wherein the patient shares his problems with the doctor, who, after further questioning, exam-

ines the relevant body parts and comes up with a 'clinical diagnosis'. This is followed by a biopsy, which is a small tissue sample taken from the tumor, and sent for microscopic examination by a pathologist. While some cancers may need endoscopic examination for obtaining biopsy, others may need a CT scan or Ultrasonography to obtain tissue for biopsy. Once a diagnosis of cancer is made, the next step is to 'stage' it, to find the extent of spread (or lack of it). While traditionally the CT scan has been used, slowly the role of PET CT is being established in certain cancers.

The key is to understand that each and every cancer is different and may have to be treated accordingly, based on the findings of relevant research studies. This is the basis of 'Evidence-based Medicine (EBM)' which ought to be ideally followed in all centres.

World cancer day, observed on February 4th annually, is an initiative of the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC). The theme for this year is 'United by Unique', which places people at the centre of care and their stories at the heart of conversations. So it isn't about treating a PET CT report but the person behind the disease who needs not just the treatment, but the care.

Research has shown that the best possible care that can be offered to cancer patients is Multidisciplinary Care, which means that specialists from various branches which deal with cancer get together to put in their efforts to obtain the best possible results. The core disciplines involved are Surgical, Radiation and Medical Oncology which are directly involved in the treatment of cancer. These are supported by the pathologists; the radiologists; the nuclear medicine physicians—who interpret the PET CT results; anaesthesiologists; critical care physicians; palliative care physicians; psychologists; medical social workers and many others. When these supporting physicians focus only on cancers, the outcomes improve. Thereby, we need onco-pathologists,

onco-radiologists, onco-anaesthesiologists and so on.

Nuclear Medicine Physicians, apart from interpreting PET CT scans, can also provide treatment for certain cancers, especially thyroid cancers. This needs specialised equipment and personnel which are regulated by the government, in view of the potential radioactive hazards. Specially qualified technical staff are required, without whom the equipment will not be approved for use.

Sadly, we do not have any medical oncologists in Meghalaya. However, administration of chemotherapy is taken care of by Clinical Oncologists (a radiation oncologist who is trained in administering chemotherapy). While this may suffice for most cancers, treatment of blood cancers may need the expertise of medical oncologists. Apart from this, most of the other specialists are available at NEIGRIHMS. The post for Nuclear Medicine Physician has been advertised and a PET CT scan may be installed in due course, once we have the right manpower. However, considering the patient load, there is need for more specialists in all the disciplines.

While the government may procure equipment, manpower requirement is likely to be a stumbling block. The young doctors of the state should strive to equip themselves with the requisite degrees and come back to serve the state. The need for allied healthcare workers in related branches is also important and several youngsters can choose to join relevant courses.

So, does Meghalaya need the PET CT? Yes, but it is a test which is to be used for selected patients. Should patients seek treatment outside the state for lack of a PET CT? No. It is only a staging evaluation which may be necessary for certain cancers. Each and every patient is unique and may need to be treated in different ways, using Evidence-based Medicine.

Dr. Caleb Harris M.Ch. (Surgical Oncology) Additional Professor, Surgical Oncology, NEIGRIHMS (views expressed are personal) Email: surgonco@outlook.com

The Language Scalpel

By Chiranjib Haldar

Delhi's prominent Khan Market bookstore and hang-out Bahrasons, tweeting the reappearance of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* on its shelves claimed, 'This groundbreaking & provocative novel has captivated readers for decades with its imaginative storytelling and bold themes.' The history of banned books in India is contentious, spanning decades of socio-political upheaval. From the colonial era to the present, governments and institutions have sought to censor books that they deemed to be subversive or offensive, leading to clashes with authors, publishers and free speech votaries. While some prohibitions have been

on White House by Seymour Hersh, was briefly banned for contending Morarji Desai to be a CIA informer. The former US Secretary of State even testified unequivocally in court on the former Prime Minister's non-culpability. The ban on Greville Wynne's *The Man from Moscow*, a former MI5 operative's memoirs, was triggered since it misrepresented the Indian government's policies and created a furor among mandarins.

The practice of outlawing books was once a countenance for British authoritarianism towards their Indian subjects. Erotica was supposed to be harmful for the natives as were books that

"In post-independent India, the earliest book to be banned was Stanley Wolpert's Nine Hours to Rama, a fictional account of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination portraying the slayer, Nathuram Godse with empathy. Interdicted in Nehruvian India of 1962, it was deemed to be promoting revulsion between communities."

lifted over time, one truism is certain. Literature and the novel as a genre can defy authority, incite debates and push boundaries in the face of repression and censorship. In post-independent India, the earliest book to be banned was Stanley Wolpert's *Nine Hours to Rama*, a fictional account of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination portraying the slayer, Nathuram Godse with empathy. Interdicted in Nehruvian India of 1962, it was deemed to be promoting revulsion between communities.

When Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was legally liberated, the judgment had wheeled the spotlight on an open letter the novelist had written to then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in

discussed the possibility of liberation for Indians. Maybe with bureaucratic maladroitness acting as a saviour for Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in India, we have reached a zenith where we can debate and not censor books we disagree with. *The Satanic Verses* was not about a religion but 'about migration, metamorphosis, divided selves, love, death, London and Bombay - deals with a prophet - who is not called Mohammed living in a city made of sand; it dissolves when water falls upon it,' wrote Salman Rushdie.

In the United States, the 1950s saw a wave of censorship in response to the alleged peril of communism. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* remains one of the most

What is ironic is that the Press Trust of India notification asserted that the proscription did not detract from the literary and artistic merit of Rushdie's work. Can we extrapolate that thirty seven years after the ban, the nation, the literary world and readers en masse stand vindicated?

1988. Rushdie expressed disbelief that the book had been banned by the Ministry of Finance and highlighted that the *Verses* "...is being proscribed for, so to speak, its own good!" The official version was that the book was banned as a pre-emptive measure. What is ironic is that the Press Trust of India notification asserted that the proscription did not detract from the literary and artistic merit of Rushdie's work. Can we extrapolate that thirty seven years after the ban, the nation, the literary world and readers en masse stand vindicated?

The print media terming the ban as 'a philistine decision' or 'thought control' and eminent literateurs like Kingsley Amis, Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter condemning the embargo as deplorable is one part of the story. In hindsight, the worldwide protests, book burnings, a prominent religious figurehead's pontifical diktat all appear unjust and a misnomer for any kind of sacrilege. In 2012, the Rajasthan government sought the arrest of four Indian authors after they downloaded a few passages from the *Satanic Verses* and read them out at a literary festival in the city.

And it is not always charges of profanity or blasphemy that put an embargo on a book. Books inimical to regimes or business tycoons have also been put on the guillotine. Hamish McDonald's *The Polyester Prince*, a saga on the life of Reliance Czar Dhirubhai Ambani's rags-to-riches journey was banned in 1998 but the ban was later lifted. The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nix-

iconic critiques of censorship and mass conformity ever. Similarly, the erstwhile Soviet Union censored many classics considered politically seditious; including those by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and George Orwell. Thus censorship has thrived and remains a powerful deterrent in the hands of regimes around the world to stifle independent thought using a range of justifications. India's moral guardians believed in the maturity of Vox populi or else how does one explain D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* deemed obscene and sexually explicit in 1954 but acceptable in 1960.

Another book ban bites the dust and sceptics wonder about the ethical high ground against censorship. The revoking of the ban on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, is a deeply moving reminder of literature's capacity to make sense of the unthinkable in microcosm. Like Rushdie's physical and literary resuscitation after the horrific knife stab, this rescinding is a cherished, affirming meditation on life, loss and love. It symbolises permissibility in a modern, supposedly secular India to treat such leitmotifs. As Salman Rushdie bluntly put it in his novel *Knife* "Language was my knife. If I had unexpectedly been caught in an unwanted knife fight, maybe this was the knife I could use to fight back." Books are pollinators of our minds, disseminating self-replicating ideas through space and time.
(The writer is a commentator on politics and society.)

“Let your dreams outgrow the shoes
of your expectations.”

— Ryunosuke Satoro

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXVII No. 174 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2025

Tears over Murmu

PRESIDENT Droupadi Murmu is the most respected leader by virtue of the position she holds and this respect has only been heightened by her dignified behaviour in various top capacities. An unsavoury row has erupted over her address of both houses of Parliament at the start of the Budget session. In the first place, senior Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi should have avoided the kind of observations they made in a casual chat, calling the President a “poor thing”, “weak, exhausted” etc. This was the comment made by Sonia Gandhi on the President’s often slow reading of a prepared text; or it might even be that she was exhausted by the very act of having to read heavy and lengthy text that lasted a while. Rahul Gandhi added to the President’s embarrassment by calling her speech “boring.” All of these should have been avoided in the larger interests of social decorum and parliamentary dignity. A President does not operate in the political realm and should not be subjected to loose talk.

This having happened, the BJP caught on and is not leaving any stone unturned to “protect the honour,” of the President. Prime Minister Modi himself came upfront to castigate the Gandhis and term their references an insult to tribals and womanhood – a script that his party has already laid out. BJP’s tribal MPs have filed a privilege notice against Sonia Gandhi. A case has been filed in Jharkhand against Sonia Gandhi. All these are simply showmanship and must be treated as such. The level of political discourse has touched a deep low for a while now. Sensible discussions rarely take place even in the hallowed halls of parliament or assemblies. Each side is out to outwit the other side by hook or by crook. They make a mountain out of a molehill, if only to derive maximum political advantage.

It should not go unnoticed at this time that the Modi government had, almost provocatively, avoided inviting the President for the inauguration of the new Parliament building in May, 2023; and instead a message from her was read out. This raised eyebrows. Criticism was that the BJP and Modi intended it as an insult to the tribal community and that her presence was “unwelcome” due to rules set by the priests. A Congress government would have dismissed such “rules” outright. The BJP can be trusted to play the flute. Doing lip-service to the causes of the poor from the podium or feeding them with free ration – a scheme started under the UPA government with encouragement from Sonia Gandhi through the national food security act – alone will not do. Ensuring India’s tribals and Dalits a dignified life is still a far cry even three quarters of a century after Independence. They should get their due in all government fields. Discourse should centre around such larger issues. Petty issues can wait.

Letters to the Editor

Eyesores to Shillong’s Urban Aesthetics

Editor,

I am writing this to reinforce and support G. Shabong’s letter to the editor, “Whither Smart City?” (ST 01.02.2025). As a dutiful husband, I drop and pickup my wife from work daily. I start from Mawlai Nongwar and pass through Jaiaiw, Police Bazar, Barik, Dhanketi, St. Edmunds stretch or sometimes Laitumkhrah via Cathedral Road and Lewrynghep to reach my destination which is in Rngi Neng, Nongthymmai. Shillong emits “Scottish and English vibes” as one technician said, when I took him to a Fast Food stall in Don Bosco Square. He stayed for another 2 days (from his own pocket) to immerse himself deeply. I aspire to visit those countries one day, hopefully. As for now, I try to soak in as much as possible, what our little city has to offer. Regularly, I see an old man opposite Bawri Mansion, absorbing the morning sun like a sponge and doing half-exercises, while his jacket hangs on the rusty railing. In the evening when the CRP personnel leave their camp (Jingkieng Mawlai), their faithful dog, guards his bus and barks at oncoming traffic as the driver manoeuvres the bus from the camp. When the

sun sets, I occasionally stop or ride slowly when I reach All Saints’ Church.

The fluttering tricolour, with the orange sunset as a backdrop is a sight to die for. On my return journey, on lucky days, the splendid sunset view in Dhanketi waits for me. Although Bawri Mansion is shadowed during sunset, the reflected yellow rays from the glass panels of Hotel Heiga and other buildings along that stretch illuminates the road and the traffic, further adding effect to the sight. The silhouette view of the old St. Anthony’s School is one which I missed dearly.

However, Shillong also has many eyesores. From Bimola all the way to Centre Point, the railings, the drains on both sides and especially the water pipes are smeared with lime and betelnut/panmasala stains. The unregulated manner of how wires are being installed and hanging loose, also diminishes the urban aesthetic of our city. The loose hanging unorganised wires along the Don Bosco – Police Point stretch is a huge pimple that needs to be dealt with. Many localities in Shillong face the same problem. The above areas draw huge numbers of visitors every day and through this, I humbly urge the concerned minister to address the issue. I believe there are opportunities for many unemployed youths and startups in such adversities and hopefully our Government will see this.

We don’t always admit it, but there’s something oddly satisfying about unwinding with a game of Ludo, after a long day (where luck decides if you win or lose, much like life itself). When suddenly, BAM—I saw an ad. Three big-shot celebrities, smiling away while promoting a tobacco-related product – Vimal. I sat there, stunned. “Seriously? What are they even doing?” It felt like a punch straight to the gut. Just like the probability of rolling a six rises the more times you throw the dice, the more these ads appear, the higher the chances of cancer creeping into more lives. Except this isn’t a game where you can reset and try again. The stakes are real.

I had to take a second to process it. These aren’t just any people—these are celebrities with millions of followers, most of them young and impressionable. These are people the youth look up to, and they’re endorsing something linked to cancer?! We already know how social media works. I joined social media a year ago, and if there’s one thing I’ve realized, it’s that ‘influencer culture’ is ridiculously powerful. So now, if their favourite celebs are casually promoting something harmful, what message are we sending?

Who are they going to listen to? The government, with its boring anti-tobacco ads that nobody watches, or the slick, well-produced ad that pops up every five seconds?

Here’s the paradox: the government campaigns against tobacco with anti-smoking drives, yet celebrities promote it in glamorous advertisements. Let’s be practical. Corporate brands know what they’re doing—they use science, algorithms and psychology to make sure you don’t just see the ad but feel like you need the product. The government? Eh, they do their best but content is unrelatable, often lacklustre and disconnected... So, who’s winning here?

The hypocrisy extends to the larger system. Let’s not forget those dramatic speeches at conferences where someone declares, “We must ban tobacco sales completely!” I’ve seen it firsthand. Can we actually ban tobacco? Realistically, no. It’s a billion-dollar industry. The practical reality is that it’s nearly impossible to shut down such an entrenched industry. We are up

Yours etc.,
Kyntiewborlang Kharakor
Shillong – 17

A game-changer for Women Entrepreneurs in Meghalaya

Editor,

The Union Budget 2025-26, announced on February 1, introduced a landmark initiative aimed at empowering women entrepreneurs, particularly those from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). This new scheme offers term loans of up to Rs 2 crore to 5 lakh first-time SC/ST women entrepreneurs over the next five years.

For Meghalaya, where economic growth is often hindered by limited industrialization and job opportunities, this initiative presents a significant opportunity. If effectively utilized, it could foster economic inclusion, self-reliance, and job creation, particularly in Shillong, the state’s vibrant capital.

Shillong’s Economic Landscape: Challenges and Opportunities. Shillong, known for its rich cultural heritage and growing tourism industry, faces several economic hurdles:

- Limited industrialization restricts employment

against a mountain of money and influence, making it a daunting battle.

So, if we can’t stop it outright, WHAT CAN WE DO?

This is where I keep saying—“we need awareness. I don’t mean the kind where someone gives a speech in a hall and everyone nods half-heartedly before forgetting about it. I mean real, on-the-ground awareness. If people are going to have two choices in front of them, they need to know enough to make the right one.

And no, we can’t sit around waiting for the government to step in. Let’s be honest—their campaigns often feel outdated. What we need is education at the grassroots level. Teach kids in schools. Talk about it in villages and communities. Make it something people discuss naturally, like they do about traffic or politics.

Every time I talk about this, someone always pipes up with, “We’re all going to die anyway! Could be cancer, could be an accident, so who cares?”

Okay. By that logic, let’s all start walking in the middle of the road! But we don’t. We use the footpath. (Well, if we can find one. Here, some footpaths disappear halfway, and others are so narrow you might as well walk on the road. But we try!)

The point is, we naturally avoid unnecessary risks. We wear seat belts. We look both ways before crossing. We hold the railing when climbing down slippery stairs (unless you enjoy living dangerously). So why not do the same with our health? Why knowingly take a risk when you can take the safer path?

A doctor once said that if we eliminated tobacco, cancer rates would drop by 70%. Let that sink in. SEVENTY PERCENT. As someone who has been through cancer, that number shook me. I wouldn’t wish this experience on anyone, and if avoiding tobacco could save that many lives, why aren’t we pushing harder for awareness?

But here’s where it gets even messier. If big celebrities are endorsing harmful products today, you know that in a few years, they’ll pass the torch to local or national influencers. I’ve already seen a reel (a short form video) where a local

opportunities in the private sector. • Overdependence on government jobs leads to high unemployment rates among educated youth.

- Lack of access to capital makes it difficult for aspiring entrepreneurs, especially women, to secure funding.

- Migration of talent forces many young professionals to leave for metro cities like Guwahati, Kolkata, and Bengaluru.
- An underdeveloped startup ecosystem limits mentorship, funding, and business incubator support.

This new scheme could help Shillong overcome these challenges by enabling SC/ST women to build businesses, generate employment, and contribute to Meghalaya’s economic development.

How Shillong’s Women Entrepreneurs Can Benefit.

The financial support provided under this scheme can unlock several entrepreneurial opportunities in Shillong:

- Boosting Tourism and Hospitality

As one of India’s top tourist destinations, Shillong offers vast potential for women entrepreneurs. Government-backed funding can help establish eco-resorts, homestays, travel agencies, adventure tourism businesses, and local handicraft ventures.

- Promoting Agri-Business and Organic Farming

Meghalaya’s fertile lands are ideal for organic farming and horticulture. Women entrepreneurs can use the

A game of chance – But is cancer one?

By Warimeki Lyngwa

influencer casually takes out a gutkha saying, “Nga bam Shekhar bha te!” (I eat Shekhar often!). And guess what? The comments are full of people saying, “Me too!” It seems like this is cool! I didn’t even see one comment condemning it. Which means hardly anyone is aware of its dangers. It will be so dangerous if this becomes a trend, and if we let this slide, we’ll reach a point where it’s NORMALIZED.

A woman recently sued Shah Rukh Khan for endorsing an education app, and guess what? A law just passed that says celebrities can now be held accountable if the product they promote harms people. So here’s my wild idea—if these celebs are promoting products linked to cancer, make them pay! Cancer treatment is insanely expensive, so why not redirect their fat endorsement checks toward patient care? Maybe then, they’ll think twice before selling death to their fans.

But of course, here comes the loophole—they’ll say, “Oh, but it’s just an elaiichi (cardamom) product!”

Ah, the classic defence. Let’s call it what it really is: a joke. We all know what they’re actually selling. If it were just elaiichi, why does it come with the same branding, the same colours, and the same hidden messages as gutkha and pan masala? Why is the packaging so eerily similar to known tobacco products?

It’s strategic. It’s intentional. And it’s deceptive marketing at its finest.

We’re not fools. Nobody’s running to a shop at 9 PM for cravings for elaiichi. The whole “it’s just a mouth fresher” excuse is a legal loophole designed to escape accountability while keeping the business alive. And the worst part? It works—because laws are still too weak to tackle these shady tactics.

So yeah, hold celebrities accountable. But also close the loopholes. Call out these tricks for what they are. Because at the end of the day, whether they label it elaiichi, mouth fresher, or anything else—it’s still funding the same deadly industry.

At the end of the day, we can’t fight cancer by staying silent. We can’t sit around waiting for only the government to fix the prob-

lem. We’ve seen it happen time and again—awareness campaigns that come and go, big speeches that sound good but lead to nothing, and messages that only pop up once or twice a year. And then? Nothing.

But cancer doesn’t wait for special days. It doesn’t care about campaigns or government policies. It shows up uninvited, and by the time you realize it, your whole life has changed. If we sit back and expect others to fix things, we’re just fooling ourselves.

That’s why we, as individuals, have to take responsibility. I know we can’t stop cancer completely—that’s not in our hands. But here’s something to think about:

If you knew something had even a 1% chance of harming your child, would you let them have it? Would you hand them something dangerous and just hope for the ‘chance’?

Of course not. We do everything we can to protect the people we love. We warn them about the dangers. We teach them how to stay safe. We don’t let them take risks.

So why should this be any different?

We can’t control everything, we can’t change things for ourselves perhaps, but we can educate. We can talk. We can create awareness before it’s too late. It starts at home. It starts with us.

Let’s teach our kids to take care of their health before they learn the hard way. Let’s talk about the risks, about the importance of early detection, about prevention—not in a way that scares them, but in a way that prepares them.

And beyond our homes, let’s take it to our communities. Let’s stop making awareness something that only happens on “official” days. Every day matters. Every conversation matters.

If there’s even a 1% chance that we can prevent it, shouldn’t we take it?

If we refuse to question, if we refuse to speak up, we let the cycle continue. But if we dare to challenge, dare to educate, dare to care, we can turn that 1% into something bigger. Because the strongest weapon against cancer isn’t just medicine—it’s awareness—not because of some campaign, but because you care.

That’s how we move forward.

for eligibility and application guidelines.

- Develop a Business Plan – A strong plan with financial projections will enhance funding prospects.

- Seek Mentorship – Business incubators and experienced entrepreneurs can provide valuable guidance.

- Leverage Digital Platforms – Use government-backed portals like Startup India and MSME loan schemes.

- Network with Other Entrepreneurs – Joining local business communities can open doors to collaboration and growth.

The Road Ahead. Shillong’s women entrepreneurs now have a golden opportunity to drive Meghalaya’s economic transformation. By leveraging this scheme, they can create jobs, boost local industries, and position Shillong as a key economic hub in Northeast India.

With the right support, mentorship, and determination, this initiative can turn entrepreneurial dreams into reality, making Shillong a thriving business destination.

Yours etc.,
Riaaakor M Kharmalki,
Chennai

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

A mirror to our intelligence or a mirage of progress?

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

Emerging technologies like DeepSeek AI are worthy of awe and critical evaluation in this AI era where machines are taking the lead in determining how quickly humanity advances. As a worried citizen of India, especially from a state like Meghalaya that takes pride in its natural beauty, cultural legacy, and intellectual vigour, I believe it is important to ask questions about the consequences of these developments. DeepSeek AI is a representation of technological skill, with its bold assertions and innovative accomplishments. However, hidden under its shiny surface is a maze of ethical concerns, technical challenges, and societal ramifications that require our attention.

The Rise of DeepSeek AI
DeepSeek AI is a significant advancement in the development of large language models (LLMs), as described in its most current technical publications on models such as DeepSeek-V3 and DeepSeek-R1. These models are expected to have reasoning powers that are unmatched due to their architectures, which have hundreds of billions of parameters, and their use of revolutionary approaches such as Multi-Head Latent Attention (MLA) and auxiliary-loss-free load balancing. They have been trained on trillions of tokens and optimized using the latest techniques, including FP8 mixed-precision frameworks and reinforcement learning.

The accomplishments are indeed remarkable:

- Reasoning Capabilities:** DeepSeek-R1 promises to be able to compete with OpenAI’s o1 series in mathematical reasoning and logical challenges.
- Efficiency:** DeepSeek-V3 has lower training costs than many other models, and it outperforms a lot of open-source models in benchmarks for coding, mathematics, and multilingual tasks.
- Distillation Techniques:** Smaller models distilled from DeepSeek-R1 show impressive performance improvements, making advanced AI capabilities more accessible to everyone.

However, as we admire these accomplishments, we must consider the price that they come with. And perhaps more importantly, who is responsible for this expense?

The Ethical Dilemma
The emergence of artificial intelligence systems such as DeepSeek brings up serious ethical concerns. Meghalaya has a history of grassroots movements and community-centered governance, which provides a distinctive perspective for examining these challenges.

- Data Sovereignty:** DeepSeek-V3 was trained on 14.8 trillion tokens of data collected from around the world. How much of this data comes from Indian languages or indigenous knowledge systems? Are these contributions recognized or rewarded in any way? There is a danger that Meghalaya’s rich oral traditions and multilingual heritage will be taken without proper recognition or representation.

- Algorithmic Bias:** DeepSeek models have problems with mixing languages, even if they are said to perform better than other models in several languages. This brings up questions regarding fairness in language. In a place like Meghalaya, where Khasi, Garo, Jaintia, and other languages are spoken alongside English and Hindi, these kinds of prejudices could push native dialects even further to the side.

- Control and Accountability:** Who is responsible for the implementation of such powerful systems? The reports highlight efficiency and performance, but they do not provide any methods for preventing misuse. Meghalaya has seen the consequences of unregulated mining industries on its environment. Could unregulated artificial intelligence lead to similar exploitation in the digital world?

The Devil is in the Details
DeepSeek’s technical advancements are impressive, however they do have several shortcomings:

- Challenges in Rein-

forcement Learning: There are many problems associated with relying on reinforcement learning (RL) for reasoning capacities. The “aha moments” that are presented in the training of DeepSeek-R1-Zero demonstrate how unpredictable RL processes may be. Is it possible to trust systems that develop on their own without any explicit supervision?

- Readability and Usability:** DeepSeek-R1 has difficulty with readability and language coherence, even though its reasoning performance has improved. These constraints are important for a state like Meghalaya, which places a high priority on clear communication, whether in education or governance.

- Energy Consumption:** Training models like DeepSeek-V3 requires millions of GPU hours. The reports highlight the cost-effectiveness in terms of dollars, but they do not take into account the effect on the environment. The unspoiled scenery of Meghalaya serves as a reminder that we should not sacrifice natural equilibrium in the sake of technological advancement.

What we can learn from India’s history

India’s history provides important lessons on how to balance progress with preservation:

- While the Green Revolution brought about technological improvements that changed agriculture, it also resulted in environmental degradation and socio-economic inequities.
- The IT boom made India a global powerhouse, but it also made the digital divide in the country worse.

In a similar vein, artificial intelligence technologies such as DeepSeek have the potential to create new forms of inequality between those who run these systems and those who are subjected to them.

Request for Responsible Innovation
As citizens of India, and more specifically as guardians of Meghalaya’s unique identity, we must insist on responsible innovation:

- Inclusive Data Practices:** Developers of artificial intelligence (AI) should work with local communities to make sure that the training data includes a variety of different people. For example, adding Khasi folklore or Garo proverbs could enhance models while also protecting cultural heritage.

- Transparent Governance:** Governments are required to create legal frameworks in order to monitor the development and use of artificial intelligence. The way that Meghalaya makes decisions by reaching a consensus could be a good example of how to implement participatory governance in the field of artificial intelligence ethics.

- Sustainable Development:** Developers ought to give precedence to energy-efficient structures and investigate renewable energy sources when training huge models. The hydropower potential of Meghalaya could be used to support sustainable AI research.

- Public Awareness:** It is necessary to inform citizens about the strengths and weaknesses of artificial intelligence. Schools and colleges in Meghalaya may implement curricula that integrate traditional knowledge with contemporary technologies.

The conclusion is that it is a future that is worth having. DeepSeek AI is both a challenge and an opportunity. We have arrived at a point in time where technology is advancing and culture is being preserved. We must now decide which direction to go in order to commemorate our past while still making progress toward the future. We must make sure that artificial intelligence is used to assist people, not the other way around. The foggy hills of Meghalaya remind us that we can make progress without sacrificing harmony. Instead of only looking for deeper intellect, we should be searching for deeper truths.

(The writer is Advocate, Trade Unionist and Humanist)

DeepSeek’s technical advancements are impressive, however they do have several shortcomings:

- Challenges in Rein-

"Don't watch the clock; do what it does. Keep going."

—Sam Levenson

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXXV No. 175 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2025

Media and Politics

In a democracy, the role of the media is to inform, educate and entertain. The media reports and also critiques government functioning so as to enable the public to advocate for better governance or to vote out a government that has failed to perform and address public grievances. The media itself is a votary of responsible and transparent governance and accountability even as it also has to check its own ethical trajectory. In India today there are news channels and newspapers that have become the propaganda machinery of the party in power. This compromise by media barons and their readiness to toe the government line is a sad commentary of what is seen in India today. With the burgeoning of media channels and Youtubers, keeping a check on media is becoming a tall order. Youtubers earn per view so the more views the more is their income. This pushes such Youtubers to sensationalise news and sometimes to indulge in disinformation campaigns. This is a dangerous trend that needs to be arrested.

Another important role of the media is to act as the watchdog and to throw light on the personal and professional lives of politicians. Closer to elections the media also scrutinizes political parties and their mode of functioning — who they give tickets to and who they deprive and why. Two media channels here reported that the VPP would not be giving the ticket to a certain candidate based on their own news sources and it turned out to be a reality. However, the VPP chief castigated the two media channels and called them propagandists with an agenda. The Shillong Press Club and the Meghalaya Editors' and Publishers Association (MEPA) took a dim view of this and in a letter asked the VPP Chief to apologise to the two media channels. The MEPA was represented by its Vice President Rajib Choudhury because the media in Meghalaya has never been communally divided. This resulted in the VPP youth wing threatening to take out a two-wheeler rally to question why the VPP chief should apologise to a non-tribal (mynder in Khasi).

The two media organisations reacted saying that Rajib Choudhury is an elected member of the MEPA and is not acting on his individual capacity but is representing an Association. This souring of relations between the media and a political party is unwarranted. Normally politicians take criticism in their stride and if they feel the need to contest what the media has reported they usually shoot out a rejoinder or call a press conference to clarify their points. No political party or politician in the past has ever differentiated between tribal and non-tribal journalists because the media in Meghalaya has embraced all with the passion, qualification and acumen to be a journalist. This fraternal spirit cannot be disrupted by political forces that seek to discredit the media instead of keeping their own house in order. In Meghalaya politicians and media persons have had a healthy respect for each other despite differences. This spirit should continue and attempts to sow the seeds of communalism and racism among media persons ought to be nipped in the bud.

Tarun Bhartiya: Life extraordinaire

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

It's been more than a week since Tarun Bhartiya passed away because of a heart attack, but the tributes to him continue to flow. Of all the tributes that were paid to him, the one by Ravish Kumar was, for me personally, the most noteworthy. Ravish revealed that Tarun was the person who gave him his break when he first joined NDTV. He was effusive in his praise of Tarun, labelling him as someone whose editing skills were exceptional and ahead of their time. Ravish termed Tarun a diamond, calling himself to be fortunate to have known someone like him. Ravish himself is a prominent figure in the Indian news landscape, having amassed over 12 million followers on his YouTube channel, which he launched after leaving NDTV. In his new book '2024: The Election that Surprised India', Rajdeep Sardesai, a well-known news anchor at India Today has devoted a couple of pages to Ravish and how his news activism had a role to play in the recent parliamentary election. To have someone like Ravish who has had an oversized impact on the national political landscape praise Tarun in the way he did was a tribute few would be fortunate to receive.

Tarun himself had always been a champion of progressive causes, and this journey began a very long time ago. In another tribute, eminent Assamese sociologist Sanjay Borbora revealed that after the Babri Masjid's demolition, Tarun left his hostel for Ayodhya. There, he volunteered as a peace activist and stayed at the local office of the Communist Party of India. A harsh critic of the Hindutva politics, he was one of the many artists who returned their national awards in 2015 to protest against the atrocities being committed against the minorities and dissenters of the government. One can go through the letter which he wrote to the President of India and find not only the mention of Babri Masjid but also of the resistance of the indigenous peoples of Meghalaya against attempts to mine uranium by the Union Government. In that letter, he mentions Kong Spelity Lyngdoh Langrin, who refused millions of rupees offered by UCIL to lease her land for mining. She did this after experiencing the radio-active pollution created by test mining in the village. If there's a person who should embody

the determination of indigenous peoples to maintain the autonomy over their ancestral territory which existed before the old kingdoms and the new nations that have emerged in South Asia, it will be Kong Spelity Lyngdoh Langrin.

Tarun was not only recording stories of resistance, but also actively leading the vanguard in the fight. Thma U Rangli-Juki (TUR) was a collective that he, Angela Rangad (his wife) and others created to articulate issues of the working class. Many times, these issues get subsumed by the jaidbynriew politics, which is essentially a Khasi version of the BJP's Hindutva politics. I became part of TUR when I was still teaching at the University and the first ever protest I took part was the Beef Party that it organised to greet Amit Shah on his visit to Shillong. Thereafter, TUR organised the street vendors, and the MeECL (Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited) workers, among others. A couple of years ago, the street vendors won an important battle when the Government of Meghalaya implemented the Central Act, which had been the demand of the Meghalaya's Progressive Street Vendors Association for the last nine years. Last year, the MeECL workers also won an important victory when the Meghalaya High Court directed the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) to pay casual and contractual employees of Grade-III and IV posts with equal pay for equal work and with minimum pay scale. The leadership by Tarun and Angela were instrumental in these victories, which are a momentous occasion for working class politics in a state where identity based Jaidbynriew politics has been used to obscure and divide the working class for the benefit of the few.

The emergence of working-class politics in the state, in its nascent form, has been made possible through the efforts and personal risks taken by Tarun and Angela. They created the platform through TUR and Raiot (an online webzine) which helped those of us who also believe in a similar politics to express our thoughts and take part in the movements that one day might create

a space for a progressive alternative. Tarun was also the critical link that connected the politics on the ground with working-class movements at the national level. For one meeting of the Workers Power Union (an amalgamation of workers' union supported by TUR) he got well-known trade-unionist, activist and lawyer Sudha Bharadwaj to conduct the training program. Sudha Bharadwaj was among the activists, lawyers, and academics arrested on 28 August 2018 under UAPA in the controversial Bhima Koregaon. A special NIA court later granted her bail. The same case led to the arrest of Stan Swamy, an Indian Catholic priest and indigenous tribal rights activist, who died in 2021 from health complications while incarcerated. Last year, Arundhati Roy, the Booker Prize winner and political activist, had visited Shillong and stayed at Tarun and Angela's place. If there's a progressive cause in the country, Tarun would most certainly know about it and the people who are involved in it. His loss is a loss of all these invaluable connections that working class politics in Meghalaya needs in order to grow and prosper.

Beyond his activism, Tarun was an exceptional artist. He received multiple national and international awards for his documentaries, two of which were significant in capturing the life-world and landscape of the indigenous Khasis. In his documentary, 'Kings Have Resorts People Have Songs,' he depicted the millet festival of Long Hai, a song not sung in Syndai (a War Khasi village in West Jaintia Hills) for 65 years. The award-winning 'The Brief Life of Insects' highlighted the improvisational essence of folk music as farmers in Umpohwin, a Bhoi Khasi village on the Assam-Meghalaya border, constructed songs which they sang while threshing paddy. Tarun had also become recently interested in photography, which was part of his evolution as an artist who always wanted to observe and reveal hidden truths through his work. His photographs, mostly black and white, evoke a thirst for the story behind those captured moments. The last

time I met him was in Fire Brigade, where he was standing on the footpath near the junction clicking pictures. I don't think that he was doing it for a project, but he was just documenting a part of the city and the people he deeply loved.

What distinguished Tarun from his peers were not only his technical skills but also his deep sense of humanity, enriched by his voracious reading. You talk about anything to Tarun and most probably he will have an opinion about it. Many a times people pretend to know a subject but dig deep enough and you realise it's shallow and muddled. That was not the case with Tarun, who could engage with you at a level where you don't feel that you are wasting your time. People who were paying their tribute to him during his funeral service also mentioned the vast knowledge that he had imbibed. It was that vast repository that he had built up, combined with his mastery over his craft, making documentary films or taking pictures, which set him at a level above many of his peers.

Tarun and Angela asked me last year if I was looking to move abroad for further studies or a job. I told them I have no intention of leaving Shillong and eventually I am going to die here. Tarun was thrilled at my response and exclaimed that there's nothing wrong with staying where you love and spending your life among the people you care about? That conversation proved prescient; a few months later, Tarun died shortly after returning from Ahmedabad, where his work on Niam Khasi/Tre had been exhibited.

As an atheist, I cannot romanticise his death or claim that I will eventually meet him. Tarun, who also was a skeptic, would have scoffed at this fake gesture. He knew very well that this is the only life that any of us have got and whatever we do in this life has no repercussions afterwards. All I can honestly say is that Tarun lived life on his own terms, fought for just causes, created timeless art, and built enduring friendships—all while being a devoted husband and a doting father to his children. I bid you adieu, comrade. Lal Salaam/Red Salute.

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

Complexities of Articles 371A and 371G: Union-State Conflicts & Lessons from the Sixth Schedule

By Erwin K. Syiem Sutnga

India's Constitution safeguards the unique cultural, social, and political identities of its tribal regions through provisions like Articles 371A (Nagaland) and 371G (Mizoram). These grant autonomy over customary law, land ownership, and resource management, yet their implementation has led to jurisdictional conflicts with Union and Concurrent List provisions under the Seventh Schedule.

While the Naga Accord highlights the historical and political significance of Article 371A, it also exposes ambiguities in its application. In contrast, the Sixth Schedule (Article 244(2)) provides a structured and decentralised model of tribal governance through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). This article examines the interplay between Articles 371A, 371G, and the Sixth Schedule, drawing insights from key legal cases such as Regional Provident Fund Commissioner vs. Shillong City Bus Syndicate (1995) and recent Supreme Court rulings on mining and environmental governance.

Articles 371A and 371G: Safeguarding Tribal Autonomy or Creating Constitutional Imbroglis? Article 371A – Nagaland – Article 371A was introduced through the 16-Point Agreement of 1960, which led to Nagaland's statehood in 1963. It provides that no Act of Parliament will apply to Nagaland unless the Nagaland Legislative Assembly decides otherwise in matters of:

1. Religious or social practices of the Nagas.
2. Naga customary law and procedure.
3. Administration of civil and criminal justice according to customary laws.
4. Ownership and transfer of land and its resources.

While this was meant to preserve Naga traditions and self-governance, vague language and lack of implementation mechanisms have led to conflicts, particularly regarding resource control and customary law enforcement.

The Naga Accord (2015 Framework Agreement), signed between the Government of India and NSCN-IM, aimed to resolve the long-standing insurgency and autonomy demands. However, its lack of clarity on territorial integration and governance has deepened uncertainties.

Article 371G – Mizoram Similarly, Article 371G grants Mizoram autonomy over:

1. Religious or social practices of the Mizos.
2. Customary laws and procedures.
3. Administration of justice under customary laws.
4. Ownership and transfer of land and resources (unless the Mizoram Legislative Assembly decides otherwise).

Mizoram relies heavily on customary courts, operating alongside formal judicial systems. However, conflicts arise when customary practices clash with central laws, particularly in areas like forest conservation and land regulation. The Naga Accord and Its Implications: The Naga Accord remains central to the discussion on Article 371A. While it aims to enhance autonomy, it has exposed unresolved issues:

1. Resource Management Conflicts

Article 371A grants Nagaland control over land and resources, yet disputes arise over Union List subjects: 2010 Oil Exploration Dispute – Nagaland passed a resolution asserting autonomy over petroleum and gas regulation, but the Union Government overruled it, citing Entry 53 of the Union List (control over oilfields).

Impact – Stalled projects, economic stagnation, and increased dissatisfaction with Article 371A's effectiveness.

2. Customary Law vs. Modern Legal Principles: Naga customary laws on inheritance clash with gender equality provisions in the Indian Constitution. The Naga Accord attempts to reconcile this, but legal uncertainties persist.

3. Territorial Disputes and Inter-State Tensions: The demand for "Greater Nagalim"—integrating Nagam-inhabited areas across Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh—has triggered conflicts with neighbouring states.

Lessons from the Sixth Schedule Unlike Articles 371A and 371G, the Sixth Schedule provides a structured framework for tribal governance. It establishes Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura, granting them legislative, executive, and judicial powers over key tribal matters.

Key Features of Para 3 (Sixth Schedule) ADCs in Meghalaya can legislate on: (1) Land use and management (2) Forests (excluding reserved forests) (3) Water resources for irrigation (4) Shifting cultivation regulation (5) Appointment and succession of Chiefs or Headmen (6) Administration of justice according to customary laws.

A crucial distinction is that Articles 371A and 371G grant autonomy at the state level, whereas the Sixth Schedule decentralises power through ADCs, ensuring direct representation at the grassroots level. While Articles 371A and 371G rely on state legislative resolutions, the Sixth Schedule offers clear jurisdictional boundaries, reducing governance conflicts.

One major challenge under Articles 371A and 371G is resource management disputes. In Nagaland, the 2010 oil dispute exposed the legal ambiguity surrounding state control over petroleum. Though Article 371A theoretically grants Nagaland ownership, Union List provisions override it, leading to economic stagnation and political tensions. The Sixth Schedule, however, clearly defines ADCs' powers over land and natural resources, ensuring fewer disputes.

Further, Articles 371A and 371G lack structured mechanisms for dispute resolution, resulting in long-standing conflicts. The Sixth Schedule provides a more effective framework—the Governor has the authority under Para 15 to intervene and resolve disputes, ensuring smoother governance. Additionally, ADCs operate within a clear judicial oversight system, with appeals directed to the High Court, reinforcing constitutional compliance.

Thus, while Articles 371A and 371G attempt to protect tribal identity, their vague wording and legal gaps create governance challenges. The Sixth Schedule offers a more effective model, balancing tribal autonomy with constitutional clarity, making it a stronger alternative for safeguarding tribal interests.

Supreme Court Rulings & Their Impact on Tribal Governance: 1. T.N. Godavarma Thirumulpad vs. Union of India (1996) – Forest Conservation ADCs in Meghalaya were required to regulate timber industries, ensuring compliance with national laws. Impact: Greater ADC oversight on forest conservation and traditional land rights. 2. Supreme Court Ruling on Meghalaya's Coal Mining (2019) Issue: Meghalaya's rathole coal mining was banned by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2014 due to environmental damage. Verdict: Tribal ownership upheld, but central mining laws apply. Meghalaya must ensure mining leases, environmental clearances, and safety compliance. The NGT ban was upheld, forcing policy reforms for sustainable mining. Conclusion: Articles 371A and 371G were designed to protect tribal identity and autonomy, but their vague language and lack of dispute resolution mechanisms have led to legal and administrative challenges. In contrast, the Sixth Schedule offers a structured and effective model, balancing tribal autonomy with national integration. Meghalaya, instead of seeking an Article 371 provision, should strengthen its governance under the Sixth Schedule, ensuring that tribal rights and traditions are preserved within a constitutional framework that promotes stability and progress.

Letters to the Editor

Strengthening the MPSC: A Call for fair & incorruptible leadership

Editor,

The Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) plays a pivotal role in shaping the state's governance by ensuring that recruitment for government posts is conducted fairly and transparently. Under this leadership, the commission has implemented several best practices that have significantly improved its credibility. The release of marks post-examination, the publication of answer keys, and other measures have increased transparency, giving deserving candidates greater confidence in the system. These reforms signal a positive shift, restoring faith among aspirants who dedicate years of preparation for these competitive exams.

Civil society and advocacy groups have played a crucial role in pushing for these improvements. Their persistent calls for accountability and fairness have ensured that the Commission remains open to constructive reforms. MPSC's willingness to engage in logical and practical dialogue has led to meaningful changes, proving that an accountable system

benefits both the institution and the public it serves.

Despite these positive developments, there is still room for further progress. One of the most critical aspects that requires attention is the appointment of MPSC's chairman and members. The credibility of the Commission depends largely on the integrity of its leadership. It is imperative that those selected for these roles are individuals of impeccable character, with a demonstrated commitment to fairness and good governance. Political favouritism or appointments based on convenience rather than competence can erode the Commission's credibility, undermining the progress made so far.

To further strengthen MPSC, the government must ensure that future appointments prioritize individuals with proven administrative experience, a strong ethical foundation, and a clear vision for reform. Additionally, areas such as streamlining the examination process, expediting result timelines, and enhancing overall efficiency must remain key priorities. Aspirants should not have to wait for years for recruitment processes to conclude—timely and transparent examinations will further reinforce trust in the system.

The Government must recognize that the future of Meghalaya's public administration depends on a

meritocratic and transparent recruitment process. Appointing incorruptible leaders to the MPSC is not just a necessity—it is a responsibility. By ensuring that the right individuals helm the Commission, Meghalaya can take a decisive step toward a more efficient, accountable, and aspirant-friendly system that truly serves the interests of its people.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Why Sixth Schedule scores over Article 371

Editor,
Propos of the news "Kharkrang joins Article 371 vs Sixth Schedule debate, roots for latter" (ST 4th February 2024), it may be stated that Article 371 of the Constitution includes "Special provisions" for 11 states in the country, including six states of North East India. Article 370 and 371 were part of the Constitution at the time of its commencement on January 26, 1950; Articles 371A through 371J were incorporated subsequently.

Article 371A (13th Amendment Act, 1962), for Nagaland was inserted after a 16-point agreement between the Centre and the Naga People's Convention in 1960 which led to the creation

of Nagaland in 1963 and it reads "Parliament cannot legislate in matters of Naga religion or social practices, Naga Customary law and procedure, administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law, and ownership and transfer of land without concurrence of the state Assembly".

Article 371B (22nd Amendment Act, 1969), Assam reads, "the President may provide for the constitution and functions of a committee of the Assembly consisting of members elected from the State's tribal areas".

Article 371C (27th Amendment Act, 1971), Manipur reads, "the President may provide for the constitution of a committee of elected members from the Hill areas in the Assembly, and entrust 'special responsibility' to the Governor to ensure its proper functioning".

Article 371F (36th Amendment Act, 1975), Sikkim reads, "the members of the legislative Assembly of Sikkim shall elect the representative of Sikkim in the House of the People. To protect the rights and interests of various sections of the population of Sikkim, Parliament may provide for the number of seats in the Assembly, which may be filled only by candidates from those sections".

Article 371G (53rd Amendment Act, 1986), Mizoram reads, "Parliament cannot make laws on 'reli-

gious or social practices of the Mizo's, Mizo customary law and procedure, administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Mizoram customary law, ownership and transfer of land... unless the Assembly... so decides".

Article 371H (55th Amendment Act, 1986), Arunachal Pradesh says The Governor has a special responsibility with regard to law and order, and "he shall, after consulting the Council of Ministers, exercise his individual judgement as to the action to be taken".

The significance is that all these provisions take into account the special circumstances of individual states, and lay down a wide range of specific safeguards that are deemed important for these northeastern States but Article 371 does not grant these states the power to make their own laws. Article 371 and its sub-article (such as 371A, 371B, etc) provide special provisions for certain states, but they do not grant legislative powers to the states. Instead, these provisions focus on ensuring equitable development, protecting cultural and economic interests, and addressing specific needs of the states. In contrast, the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution empowers District Councils in the north-eastern region, including Meghalaya, to frame rules and act as custodians of cul-

ture and indigenous people. Here lies the wisdom of Rev. James Joy Mohan Nichols Roy the architect of the Sixth Schedule.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Wanted effective labour laws

Editor,

A woman who used to work in a beauty product company was asked to quit her job by her employer when her chemotherapy started. This shows the absence of effective labour laws in our country. In addition, the social security net for such workers is almost non-existent. A worker can fight against cancer. But what can she/he do when the whole environment is afflicted with malignancy? High profit margins resulting in high cost for most of the medicines including life-saving ones is another symptom of malignancy in our society. In such an environment, it is impossible for a common person to overcome even a treatable disease and a manageable crisis.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

"The purpose of life is a life of purpose."

— Robert Byrne

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 176 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2025

Daily-wagers for life

THE Supreme Court deserves praise for its interventions in setting social injustices right. Its recent order to reinstate a set of municipal workers in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh came after these "malis" engaged in gardening work in the horticulture department failed to get justice in lower courts. The daily-wagers' grievance was that they had worked for seven years and were sacked in 2005 when they sought regularization. As is the case elsewhere too, they had neither got an appointment order or a termination letter. The court, in a landmark ruling, termed the action illegal and reinforced their labour rights.

True, the rights of the poor are more often violated even at government levels than protected or promoted. Successive administrations and the bureaucracy have demonstrated a vested interest in denying the poor their basic rights. The poor generally bear with such situations rather than challenging it. They have no means to approach courts and spend huge amounts in lawyers' fees. The malis in Ghaziabad, not far from New Delhi, deserve praise for their resolute pursuit of the case. The argument advanced by the Ghaziabad municipal corporation was that casual workers "cannot be regularised" as they were not recruited through a normal selection process. The apex court dismissed this argument by noting that these workers had been engaged in essential municipal duties for years. Today, it is a common sight that casual/temporary workers or daily wagers do most of the difficult tasks in several government departments. Such personnel are herded in to handle dangerous situations, while the "regular" staff and officers stand at a distance and "oversee" the work. Police officers, for instance, would sit on chairs in sheltered spaces and daily wagers or scouts or volunteers in casual uniforms do the policing in streets under the hot sun. Most "strenuous works" are outsourced. Huge money is thus siphoned off. A sense of laziness is prevalent across the staff manning government departments. The politicians who run governments for five-year-terms show no conviction to discipline the system. The wayward styles as we see today are in stark contrast to the way officials with a sense of patriotism and dedication to public causes behaved in the initial phase of the post-Independence era. Corruption at the bureaucratic level today is at its worst. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took power at the Centre in 2014 with a promise to end corruption. Rather, the scenario at the bureaucratic level has worsened terribly under his watch.

There is no justification for keeping people engaged in governmental work for several years without confirming them in regular service. Their very continuation in one or another work for years is a guarantee that they are capable of performing the task they have been assigned to. Hence, their regularization as permanent employees is a must. This order should now be pursued and made applicable across the country.

Is VPP shooting itself in the foot?

By Patricia Mukhim

Even the stupidest of politician would not want to quibble with anyone during the election campaign period. In fact, the general consensus among candidates and political parties is not to offend anyone at all during elections because people are spoilt for choices and easily take offence. They are compared to a person suffering from Measles who is cantankerous and easily offended. Khasis have a term for this grouchy nature, "I kumba thut niangpyrsit," (cranky and hard to please like one afflicted by measles). It is therefore surprising that the VPP should be taking on the Dorbar Shnong who should be their closest allies, as much as they are of other political parties since the dorbars are the ones organising the platforms for candidates to campaign from and the Rangbah Shnong actually chairs the meetings.

Are Dorbar Shnongs overstepping their mandate?

Only the belligerent would disagree with the decision taken by the Dorbar Shnong that all candidates should agree to speak from a common platform where each candidate can list out his/her party manifesto before the public and also be gracious enough to answer questions from the public. This is definitely a better proposition than having 5-6 candidates wanting to disturb the peace of a locality one after another for the next two weeks even as students are preparing for their Board/University exams. A political party like the VPP which is appealing especially to the youth should be more considerate about distracting them from their studies by weaning them towards campaigning for the Party.

However, it is also true that large sections of youth are happy to just be going around in vehicles and shouting party slogans as long as they are being fed and looked after. Such youth are generally the jobless variety that see election as a time for merriment and exploitation. The youth who are preparing for their exams or who are working would not have time to go around playing loud music to announce the arrival of the candidate. Political parties that indulge such youth are doing a great disservice since they will not be able to entertain those same youth once the elections are over. Would the political parties be concerned about the fate of these so-called enthusiastic

supporters once elections are over? Doubtful.

Campaign mode has to change with the times:

The question before us today is whether we should be leaning into the future or get sucked in the past. Should new methods adopted consciously by the Shnong in deference to the academic calendar of students be contested? Why would any Dorbar Shnong have ulterior motives in wanting to hold a common platform for candidates? The candidates who are prepared and ready to make impassioned appeals before the electorate should have no problems with the new arrangements. The old must give way to the new. Nostalgia about the MP elections and how well the VPP did will not win it the ADC elections. The promise of solutions to problems and better times ahead is more likely to get votes.

This is the digital age and the VPP could make more impact by making creative videos and circulating them online where every Bahdeng Bahnah and Kongdeng Kongnah will merrily watch and perhaps even be influenced. What's the point of lectures where those present are your own supporters and those whose hearts you expect to change will not step out in the cold? Traditional campaigns of going door to door and large gatherings are passe. No one has time to listen to lectures that like drones go on and on without any real impact. And if the Dorbar Shnong are allowing equal time for all candidates, what's the problem with the VPP? Why the antagonism? Why the suspicion? Its time to eliminate the shields and shenanigans that create room for distrust in the first place. Once elections are over, the VPP candidates who are elected will have to work closely with the Dorbar Shnong. So does it make sense to antagonise them?

Why target the media?
The Dorbar Shnong are not the only targets of the VPP. They have also accused some media channels of being purveyors of fake news simply because the reports go against some of the Party's acts of omission and commission. With two of their candidates being senior media persons, they should have better advised not to antagonise a section of the media, since in Meghalaya

the media is not a divided house. It's unfortunate that politicians across the board think we are laying elaborate traps for them. That's not the case at all. We report facts and those who feel we have violated media ethics should send in their rejoinders. And it is important to acknowledge that no political party is without faults either. Leaders of political parties more than anyone else should understand this and keep their ego under check. Nothing can destroy a political party as the ego can, unless Donald Trump is the role model that some are following.

What's the problem with common platforms?

One is also left wondering why other political parties in the fray are not against the common platform idea. This platform is an excellent opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their public speaking skills which all politicians must be endowed with. In common platforms there is a code of ethics applied where candidates are not allowed to go on a mud-slinging spree. Mud-slinging is the tactic of those who have nothing to say for themselves other than indulging in fault-finding and have their supporters clap over those shenanigans. These cheap campaigns are better left dumped in the waste basket of time. Candidates must learn to state their case cogently and smartly and not let their speeches deteriorate in the "I" singular as if they can do everything as lone rangers. Politics is not for such lone rangers.

The problem with Meghalaya is that people are obsessed with politics and they lose their rational faculties during the election season. People put politics at the centre of their psychological, emotional and even spiritual life. This is asking too much of politics. Once politics is reduced to our ethnic and moral identities then it becomes impossible to compromise because compromise becomes a dishonour. It's important to understand that politics is a power game and those we elect are not superhuman beings. On the contrary some of them have the lowest moral standards and don't think twice about owning up the entire earth, given a chance.

Protectionism gone overboard
Elections are also a time

of claiming to clean up the system. Each political party tries to outdo the other on this plank. One would like to know where that cleansing has to begin. Politicians across the board have used the idea of protectionism as a vote-winning strategy. How much protection is enough? When protectionism goes overboard it stifles human enterprise and creativity. The world is progressing at a rapid pace. Is protectionism preventing us tribes from joining that futuristic bandwagon? Why are we made to believe that we are endowed with lesser mental faculties than the 'dkhar'? Who has drilled this into our psyche and prevented us from pushing boundaries? Politicians of course who, before elections prepare us to walk with mental and physical crutches and instil in us the victimhood syndrome which we have become so comfortable with.

Clearly Meghalaya needs to be some young prophets of hope as opposed to prophets of doom. We need young, dynamic and radical thinkers and philosophers to redeem our people from the clutches of politicians who have learnt to treat citizens like their eternal dependents. Hence they never really want to empower people because an empowered citizenry will start asking uncomfortable questions which politicians will be caught stammering on before their lies are called out.

May the youth see through the mirage that politics is and lead their people from the trauma that politics in our state represents.

Politics: A battle of perception:

Politics is always about perception but perceptions are distant from reality. The perception today is that the NPP is a party of the affluent and corrupt elite and the UDP and HSPDP are hangers on, sharing power with the NPP because they need to be in power. Its only the VPP that is outside the realm of power holders and they are at pains to prove that they are the change that people want. Its easy to convince people that they are where they are because of the MDA government and that the VPP will change their economic statuses once it gets a grip on power. Since the VPP is yet to taste the intoxicating wine of power it can still claim to be "clean" until its Councillors get to sit in the ruling side after this election.

Let's wait and watch!

Is this Budget for Viksit Bharat?

By Indira Hirway

The Indian economy today is facing serious problems from the international and domestic fronts. That is the real situation juxtaposed against the vision of Viksit Bharat. Also, the dream of Viksit Bharat 2047 is less than 25 years away. One therefore expected another 1991 moment in this budget. However, the budget has disappointed badly.

While this disappointment in the budget is on many fronts, there are some high points. One high point is the relaxation in the income tax rates – no tax up to Rs 12 lakh personal income. This will definitely increase the demand in the economy and give a push to economic growth. About Rs 1 lakh crores will be added to the economy through this tax relaxation, and that will have a good multiplier impact. However, the impact will be limited and within our Rs. 330 lakh crores economy. Around 3.5 crore income tax payers (17.5 crore population) cannot make radical

Jal Jivan mission, PM urban Awas yojana and many other such schemes and programmes which concern the upliftment of poorer and weaker segments of our society have declined in nominal or real terms. In retrospect, the funds allotted to these programmes also appear to be highly underspent. This clearly reveals the actual lack of concern of the government for these pro-poor programmes.

The government has not been very successful in the field of providing productive employment. However, it took a positive step in the last budget by announcing apprenticeship programmes along with internship. But the government could spend only Rs 300 crores out of Rs 2000 crores allotted to this scheme last year. This perhaps reveals the government's actual low commitment to this field. This year again, the government has decided to promote the scheme. Let us hope that they are more committed to

"The Economic Survey has highlighted trust deficit as a major obstacle to our development, but the budget has nothing to say about how this deficit would be removed. The government wants to ensure that "no one should be left behind," but there is nothing in the budget to assure us of this. The rising inequalities in the country have been blatantly ignored."

changes in the demand.

Another positive point of the budget is its focus on agriculture, as it is "the key driver of the economy". Programmes like the national mission on high-yielding seeds, Dhan-Dhanya kishi yojana, promotion to pulses, and cotton mission etc. are proposed in the budget. However, the funds allocated to agriculture have increased only marginally. The impact of these new programmes will be only marginal if at all.

Again, the focus on "investing on people" in the budget is also desirable. However, the funds allotted to health and education have not shown any significant increase. Though several schemes have been presented, the matching funds are not made available. In the case of education, Rs 1,25,638 crores was allotted in the 2024-2025 budget and Rs 1,28,650 crores for the year 2025-2026 – this shows a decline in real terms. Similarly, the increase in the budget for health to Rs 98311 crores also implies only a marginal increase in real terms. Though covering gig workers under insurance and increasing seats in medical education are good steps in the right direction, without additional funds, these programmes may not be effective. It also must be added that the government's focus on insurance has resulted in the neglect of public health services. What people want are good public health services, and not just insurance, which is accessible only when there is hospitalisation. As regards primary health services, the budget allocation to primary health the National Health mission has declined in real terms. It is argued that State governments are expected to spend more on these two sectors; however, the reality is that most States are not spending enough on these sectors. Without strong human capital, economic growth on one hand and the wellbeing of the people on the other hand will suffer badly.

A careful scrutiny of the budget shows that the funds allotted to tribal development, social welfare and rural development including schemes like MGNREGA have declined in nominal or real terms. Also, funds allotted to the PM Poshan Yojana, Swachhata Mission, PM Sadak yojana, fisheries,

it this year.

Given the financial constraints (arising from huge financial incentives to the corporate sector, writing off their debts and frequently their tax evasion) on the one hand and pressure to reduce the fiscal deficit on the other hand, the budget has announced a fiscal ratio of 4.4% this year. It is clear that the government will have to change radically to expand fiscal space in the economy. Or the financial constraints will limit public expenditure on social sectors including employment and on development.

Overall, India needs 7.0 to 8.0% growth for 25 years continuously to become a developed economy. This, does not seem to be plausible or possible at present. It appears that the government is neither able to define the term Viksit Bharat clearly and in detail nor has it been able to design the pathway to Viksit Bharat. For India to move from a per capita income of \$ 2697 today to a per capita income of \$ 23380 (ILO's benchmark) requires a different growth path. More of the same approach will not work.

The Economic Survey has highlighted trust deficit as a major obstacle to our development, but the budget has nothing to say about how this deficit would be removed. The government wants to ensure that "no one should be left behind," but there is nothing in the budget to assure us of this. The rising inequalities in the country have been blatantly ignored. The concerns of a smaller, more affluent section have been covered while everyone else including the poorest are subject to indirect taxes – i.e. Income tax is reformed, but we have no idea how GST will be!

The problem really is that there is no open and free discussion on any policy or programme; there are no objective evaluations of these policies and programmes by experts. Without this openness we will not know what exactly is meant by Viksit Bharat and how to reach there.

(Dr. Indira Hirway is a Professor of Economics at the Centre For Development Alternatives, Ahmedabad, and Associate, Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, New York. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Donald Trump's stance on illegal immigration has hurt many

Editor,
While some immigrants are blessings, others can be curses. This fact is known to Donald Trump better than any other world leader. His outspoken stance on cracking down on illegal immigration in the U.S. has defined his leadership. It has also earned him plenty of critics – even from within his own country. Soon after taking over charge at the White House, the US president immediately focused on this concern. It was a key part of his "Make America Great Again" campaign. The Trump administration swiftly introduced tough measures to address what it saw as a serious threat to the future of the nation.

The new administration has already started using military planes to deport undocumented immigrants from Mexico, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Guatemala. Of course, this crackdown has not spared India. A military aircraft carrying about 100 Indian migrants has been deployed. This marks a complete departure from the usual deportation process and sends a strong message about Trump's posture in tackling illegal immigration.

It seems, unlike other leaders, Donald Trump is well aware of the risks illegal immigration poses to the U.S. if it had remained as lax

as the Biden administration. He often points to Europe—where France, Germany, and the UK are grappling with growing unrest, as some migrant groups openly challenge the government and indulge in violence. Trump argues that if the U.S. had remained complacent and encouraged a flood of infiltration as the previous administrations, it could be heading down the same dangerous path.

What has drawn criticism in India is the way migrants are reportedly being sent back in handcuffs and shackles, a sight that many in India find deeply humiliating. Many people believe that the US has overreacted in this situation, causing significant emotional distress. Not everyone agrees with this approach, but India has promptly shown a willingness to cooperate with the U.S. in dealing with undocumented Indian nationals or those who have overstayed. This suggests how immigration policies are deeply tied to international relations. Moreover, India cannot afford to strain its relationship with the USA.

However, in contrast, Trump has also won high praises for his benevolence in picking the best Indian Americans for the new administration. He is quick to heap appreciation on those who might prove promising to the country. Some notable high-profile appointments include Vivek Ramaswamy, who is co-leading the newly created Department of Government Efficiency, and Kash Patel, who has been nominated as the FBI Director. Trump has also offered key roles to individuals such

as Harmeet Dhillon, Dr Jay Bhattacharya, and Sriram Krishnan, demonstrating his appreciation for Indian-American expertise across various fields. This has certainly made Indians proud.

To sum up, Trump's immigration stance is a paradox -- iron fists for illegal migrants, open arms for high achievers. As his policies continue to unfold, one thing is pretty clear: love him or hate him, Trump knows how to make waves and how to make America great again. Should India also learn a lesson or two from Donald Trump, who never shies away from calling a spade a spade?

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

104 Indians deported by Trump Administration

Editor,
104 Indians deported by the Trump administration reached Amritsar airport. They were from different states. 30 are from Punjab; 33 each from Haryana and Gujarat; 3 each from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and 2 from Chandigarh. It is a pity to note that they were sent to India when Modi is scheduled to visit Trump on Feb 13 in Washington. This action shows that all Indians who are staying in the USA illegally will be deported and due to this urgency all the cost has been borne by the US government. As per estimates there are over 18,000 Indians who are ei-

ther overstaying or illegally staying without any genuine documents. India figures among the nations with the largest unauthorised immigrant population in the US according to Pew Research Centre. Hence India will have to rehabilitate around 18,000 nationals who have been or will be deported. India must stop illegal migration to the US and streamline legal migration routes so that such a situation may not be created in future which can embarrass the country.

Illegal immigrants, including those who overstay visas or enter through unauthorised routes, are often at risk of deportation. Many of these individuals had entered the US using irregular means, commonly referred to as the "donkey route," spending lakhs of rupees to facilitate their passage. For India, this mass deportation is embarrassing on multiple levels. First, it exposes the loopholes in India's migration system and the desperation of many to seek better livelihood abroad through illegal means.

Additionally, the incident damages India's global reputation, presenting it as a country that struggles to provide livelihoods to its citizens. Moreover, it also reflects poorly on the State Governments. While landing at Amritsar airport deportees reported that adults were handcuffed while traveling and even their shoe laces were removed to foil escape.

The first such deportation under President Donald Trump's intensified immigration crackdown in his second term underscores the complexities of illegal

immigration and the stark realities faced by those seeking a better life beyond their homeland. The sight of a C-17 Globemaster, a transport aircraft typically used for military operations, being repurposed for deportation serves as a stark reminder of the growing rigidity in immigration enforcement and the deepening rift between economic aspirations and legal barriers.

The use of military aircraft suggests a heightened sense of urgency, aligning with Trump's long standing stance that illegal immigration threatens national security and economic stability. For India, the situation presents a diplomatic challenge. While New Delhi has consistently opposed illegal immigration and affirmed its commitment to taking back verified Indian nationals, the optics of mass deportations can be problematic.

The implications of this action are both humanitarian and political, raising questions about the circumstances that led these individuals to migrate illegally and the consequences they now face upon their return.

The promise of economic prosperity, coupled with a desire to escape financial hardships and limited opportunities back home, has driven many to take perilous journeys through Latin American countries, often relying on human smugglers who charge exorbitant sums with no guarantee of success. Many of these migrants undertake treacherous paths via Mexico and the infamous Darién Gap, risking their lives in the hope of securing a future in the United States. However, for those who get

apprehended by US immigration authorities or fail to meet asylum requirements, the dream collapses into a painful reality of detention and deportation. For the deportees, the return to India is not just a physical relocation but an emotional and social upheaval. Many have spent years attempting to integrate into American society, working in low-paying jobs, and living under constant fear of immigration raids and arrests. The stigma of deportation often follows them home, with families and communities reacting with disappointment, embarrassment, or even hostility.

The United Nations and various human rights organizations have long emphasized that deportation policies must be executed with dignity and due process, ensuring that returnees are not subjected to further hardships upon repatriation. Strengthening domestic job markets, expanding skill development programs, and improving economic opportunities in rural and semi-urban areas could reduce the desperation that leads individuals to seek uncertain futures through illegal channels.

It is expected from the government that necessary steps are taken so that such situations may not arise in future.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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

"Believe you can and you're halfway there."
— Theodore Roosevelt
The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXVII No. 177 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2025

Trumpism gone overboard

THE US is at a point in time when its citizens are left wondering what next. From asserting that Canada would do better as the 15th state of the USA to looking at bringing Greenland into the fold but the more outrageous Trump plan is to take over Gaza. While the world is shell-shocked by the last proposal – taking over Gaza, the US President says he would ensure that Palestinians are resettled even while his government would build one of the planet's "greatest and most spectacular developments" there. Trump also emphasized that US troops would not be deployed since the Israel Defence Minister has ordered the military to draft a plan that would allow people in Gaza to leave voluntarily. How this plan of Trump will pan out is anybody's guess. Questions such as – where the Gazans would go and if they would leave willingly have not been answered. And what happens to the ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas of which the first phase ends in early March?

Add to these mercurial decisions are the quick deportation of illegal migrants of which over a hundred were sent back to India, shackled like slaves on an American military plane in a journey that lasted 40 hours. That India's External Affairs Minister, Jaishankar did not even raise a word of protest to this inhuman treatment of illegal Indian immigrants raises many questions about India's standing in the comity of nations. India seems to be kowtowing to Trump's eccentricities. This led to an uproar in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha on Thursday. The use of a military aircraft, along with the claims of mistreatment has hit a raw nerve especially since Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to visit President Trump in Washington shortly. Contrast this with how the Columbian migrants were deported. Columbian President Gustavo Petro barred the US military aircraft from landing in the country alleging that they were treated like criminals. Columbia sent two air force planes to fetch the deported migrants to ensure they are treated with dignity. The incident in fact took the two countries to the brink of a trade war after Donald Trump threatened to impose 25% tariffs on Colombian goods and Petro said he would retaliate in kind. India's studied silence on Trump's treatment of India migrants is troubling.

This rapid deportation of illegal migrants is one of the many actions of Trump that could have global repercussions. Add to this the Gaza takeover plan and cutting down on FBI recruitments on the plea that needless employment was created by the Biden administration. Trump came to power after catering to a constituency of voters who invested in his slogan "Make America Great Again," which meant that Americans deserved first preference over migrant workers, particularly illegal migrants. Trump is following up on his pre-electoral commitments. But whether these volatile decisions and arbitrary actions are going to hurt America in the long run is anybody's guess. For now, Trump is on a roll.

The Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) created history on January 17, 2025, by announcing the Meghalaya Civil Services (MCS) results in record time – just three months after the Mains Examination. This remarkable achievement is a big leap from the previous norm, where results often took six months to a year. While celebrating this accomplishment, it is befitting to reflect on its path forward amidst controversies in the news recently surrounded by allegations from various groups that have raised questions about its fairness, transparency, efficiency. The issues range from nepotism to delayed recruitment processes. To mention a few, the Khasi Students Union had suggested 20 points to bring about fair and transparent recruitment in MPSC. Rajya Sabha member W R Kharlukhi had urged an independent inquiry into the allegations of irregularities. The Voice of the People Party had proposed a series of measures to overhaul MPSC.

In response to the concerns, on November 2024, the government formed a Committee with senior bureaucrats of the state to revamp MPSC with a task to study and recommend reforms to overhaul the controversy-ridden MPSC. This move signals a concerted effort to address the challenges faced and provide a fresh approach to ensure fair and efficient recruitment. As a crucial institution in the state, responsible for ensuring the merit-based selection of candidates for civil services and other government positions, it is essential that MPSC addresses these concerns effectively to restore public trust and credibility.

Key issues raised as reported in the media that have emerged in recent discussions are:

1. Allegations of Nepotism and Bias: It is alleged that the recruitment process is not always merit-based and that connections, rather than qualifications, sometimes determine selection. Such allegations undermine public confidence in the Commission and discourage deserving candidates from participating in the recruitment process.

2. Lack of Transparency and Information Access: Candidates have complained about the Commission's reluctance to disclose important information, including selection criteria, results, and updates on recruitment timelines. Commission was also criticized for its failure to respond adequately to Right to Information (RTI) requests, raising further doubts about its commitment to transparency.

3. Delays in Recruitment: Delays in the examination process, result declarations, and final recruitment decisions have been other issues raised. The lack of clear timelines for conducting examinations and releasing results has led to frustration among applicants. These delays not only create uncertainty but also hinder timely employment opportunities for qualified individuals.

4. Political Interference: It is alleged that political pressure sometimes influences the recruitment process, leading to compromised decisions and favouritism. This not only harms the credibility of the Commission but also violates the principle of

From Controversy to Credibility

Vision for a Transparent MPSC

By Bijoy A. Sangma

an independent, unbiased recruitment system.

5. Inadequate Representation in the Selection Panel: GHADC member Rinaldo Sangma wrote to MPSC asking it to withhold further interviews after a Garo member in the Commission completed his term and no replacement was made. According to him, for equal representation of all major communities the inclusion of a representative from the Garo community is vital for ensuring that the unique perspectives and challenges faced by the Garo candidates are appropriately understood and considered during the screening. Such issues can result in an uneven playing field, where candidates from under-represented groups may feel the evaluations are biased.

Recognizing Progress Amidst Challenges

Despite these issues, it is crucial to recognize the strides made by MPSC in recent years. It has implemented few reforms to streamline its recruitment processes and rebuild public confidence, as highlighted in reports from credible sources. An evaluation of its key achievements reveals the following:

1. Digital Processes: To streamline recruitment and reduce delays, MPSC has been working towards digitalizing its processes. The introduction of online application systems has made it more convenient for candidates to apply for various positions. This move aims to enhance efficiency and reduce the time taken for processing applications.

2. Transparency Initiatives: In response to allegations of nepotism and lack of transparency, MPSC has initiated measures to strengthen its internal mechanisms. The Commission has been working on establishing guidelines and criteria for recruitment, which are made available to the public.

3. Addressing Recruitment Delays: Recognizing the frustration caused by delays in recruitment processes, MPSC has been focusing on adhering to timelines up to some extent. The Commission has been implementing measures to ensure that examinations are conducted as per schedule and results are declared within the stipulated time frame. This commitment to timely recruitment is aimed at restoring public confidence in the Commission's efficiency.

4. Public Engagement: Regular updates regarding recruitment processes, examination schedules, and results are being communicated through official channels.

These initiatives reflect MPSC's willingness to reforming its processes and addressing the concerns raised by the public.

The Way Forward - Scaling Up to Excellence
Despite notable achievements, challenges persist and threaten the effectiveness of MPSC, which need to be addressed. To emerge as a model public service commission in the country, MPSC must implement bold reforms and innovative strategies:

1. Insulation from Political Influence: Ensuring the independence of MPSC is crucial for

fair recruitment. Steps need to be taken to insulate the Commission from political interference. One way to achieve this is by implementing strict regulations that protect the autonomy of the Commission and prevent politicians from influencing its decisions.

2. Strengthen Governance Frameworks: Establishing independent oversight committees to monitor and audit recruitment processes and ensure that it remains free from political influence. This will ensure fairness and accountability.

3. Set Performance Benchmarks: MPSC's recent achievement in promptly delivering the MCS result offers a glimpse of its potential. Efforts need to be made to set benchmark so that the candidates do not experience prolonged waiting periods for exams and results, impacting career opportunities. To mitigate delays, a clear timeline for each stage of the recruitment cycle needs to be established with measurable goals and feedback mechanisms resulting in greater accountability.

4. Embrace Technology: One of the most impactful ways to address transparency issues is through the adoption of digital tools. Integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) for application processing, monitoring and evaluation can enhance transparency and accuracy.

5. Digital Recruitment Processes: The digitalization of the entire recruitment process, from registration to application submission to examination and final result declaration, can significantly reduce human error, delay, and manipulation.

6. Upgrade Infrastructure: Investing in modern facilities and increasing workforce capacity will help MPSC handle its workload more effectively. This includes establishing and enhancing the regional centres in the state.

7. Promote Inclusivity: To address concerns about bias as alleged and ensure that concerned communities are fairly represented, MPSC member vacancy should be promptly filled-in whenever vacancy arises. Ensuring adequate representation in recruitment panel will address the concerns of bias in the selection processes.

8. Candidate Support Services: Launching a dedicated user-friendly mobile application and online platforms to facilitate seamless interaction with candidates, provide access to resources, and streamline application procedures.

9. Invest in Human Capital Development: Ensuring that MPSC staff and panel members are well-trained in ethical recruitment practices, technology, and impartial decision-making is essential for maintaining high standards of service. Workshops and training on modern recruitment practices will ensure alignment with best practices in recruitment and governance.

10. Collaborative Partnerships: Recruitment processes can be improved by collaborating with educational institutions, professional bodies, and experts in various fields to ensure that its selection criteria are in line with industry standards. Such

partnerships can bring fresh perspectives and insights into evolving trends and help update recruitment strategies.

11. Independent Grievance Redressal System: A functional grievance redressal system is essential to address concerns about fairness and transparency. This system should be easily accessible, and candidates should have the option to track the status of their grievances online. Ensuring the accountability of the Commission in addressing complaints will help rebuild public confidence.

12. Adopt Merit-Based Evaluation System: To counter the allegations of nepotism and favouritism, a more stringent merit-based evaluation system can be adopted. This system should ensure that candidates are assessed purely based on their qualifications and performance, rather than connections or personal influences. The use of technology to anonymize candidate data during the evaluation process can help minimize human bias and promote fairness.

13. Public Consultation and Feedback Mechanisms: To improve accountability and responsiveness, regular forums for public consultation can be introduced soliciting input, where candidates and other stakeholders can voice their concerns, thus enabling continuous improvement and responsiveness to stakeholders' needs.

14. Celebrate Achievements: Publicizing MPSC's successes and reforms can inspire confidence and attract talented candidates to public service.

Potential Risks of Multiple Recruitment Boards

Another linked issue which sparked debate is the Meghalaya government's initiative to establish multiple recruitment boards, thereby diminishing the authority of MPSC. While the rapid recruitment by the departmental recruitment boards addressed immediate needs, concerns have been raised about the long-term implications of bypassing established procedures, including potential compromises in candidate quality and adherence to merit-based selection. The focus should be on making MPSC stronger, not weaker.

Rising to the Challenge

The MPSC stands at a critical juncture where its achievements can serve as a foundation for transformative progress. While the issues facing MPSC are indeed serious, they are not insurmountable. A focused approach on transparency, efficiency, and inclusivity and addressing existing gaps with innovative strategies and a commitment to excellence will not only enhance its reputation, credibility and restore public trust, but also ensure that Meghalaya's governance machinery is driven by the best and brightest talents. MPSC has the potential to become a benchmark for public service commissions across India. The time to act decisively is now!

(The author is Former Executive Director of the BMS World Mission, United Kingdom, Former National Executive Director of Hoggal Institute of Advanced Leadership, and Former Asst. Programme Coordinator of North East Region Community Resources Management Project, a Lawyer and a PhD Scholar in Management studies.)

Looking to a flight to Viksit Bharat

By G N Bajpai

In recent months, the slowdown of the Indian economy in the last quarter rattled policymakers and led to a quiet squabble among pundits. Many of the critics identified slowing consumption as the main culprit of slowing growth. The FY26 Union Budget and its drive and implications must be seen in this context. The central question facing policy makers then was this: How does the government ensure the goals of a viksit Bharat amid a gloomy outlook, made worse by a changing global dynamic? On the domestic front, there seems to be a drift towards the twilight of slowdown. On the global front, the economy is reeling under the exceptionalism of US trade policies, the rising dollar, and geopolitical duhity.

It can be fairly said that this was a particularly challenging budget to design. The finance minister has delivered the near impossible trinity of maintaining macroeconomic stability, supporting investments and finding a way to give consumption a super boost.

This year's fiscal deficit is pegged at 4.8% of GDP, lower than outlined in the July budget and still lower at 4.5% for FY26. Credibility is anchored by religiously traversing the glide path and the reduction of debt to GDP ratio from 57.1% in 2024-25 to a targeted 50% in 2030, with a pronounced trimming by 1% in the FY26 itself. Gross borrowing is held down at Rs.14.83 trillion, just 5.6% increase over last year. Nominal GDP growth is pegged at 10.1% with a deflator of 4%, which inspires credibility to revenue and expenditure estimates and delivers a subtle message to RBI to undertake balance of heavy lifting.

Public investments are a story of a relentless journey rising from just 1.5% of GDP in FY19 to 3.2% in FY25. It has doubled in the last four years. Next year's allocation, Rs.11.2 trillion, is 10.9% higher than last year's revised estimates. The facilitation of private sector participation in infrastructure building will add to capital investments. All the relevant ministries are being commandeered to prepare a three-year pipeline of projects.

Consumption is sought to be boosted by a tax cut of 0.3% of GDP. Over Rs. one trillion reductions in Income Tax cumulatively are radiating the faces of over 20 million (immediate beneficiaries) taxpayers representing the middle class. Economists estimate that 80% of tax reductions are used for consumption and 20% for savings. This is the big boost to consumption to answer critics who have noted the consumption has suffered in the last year.

The budget proposals can be sized up in three frames: short, medium and long term. In the short term it provides a fillip to GDP growth, in the medium term it seeks to raise sustainability of high GDP growth and in the long term it facilitates harvesting prosperity. It covers almost all sectors of the economy—agriculture, manufacturing and services. It promotes the welfare of rural India and of urbanites alike and in that sense is inclusive.

Transformative reforms are proposed for six sectors—power, mining, urban development including water, financial sector, ease of doing business and living, and taxation. A sharp focus is proposed for tourism, including medical tourism with 50 identified destinations, the leather and textile industries and marine products. Along with agriculture, all these sectors will generate millions of employment opportunities.

Amongst the proposals, agriculture has been rightly accorded top priority with emphasis on growth, productivity and farmers' income. National Missions of tur, urad and masoor for self-sufficiency, high yielding seeds for developing var-

ied seeds of high yield and climate resistance and cotton production to quell stagnating productivity will provide a coordinated approach to these areas. Dhan Dhanya Krishi Yojana in hundred districts of low productivity will benefit 1.7 crore farmers with proposed integrated development of agriculture in those districts.

Under the National Manufacturing Mission, MSMEs will benefit immensely from increased credit guarantee cover for micro-entrepreneurs, loans to start-ups in select 27 areas at 1% guarantee fees, term loans up to Rs.20 crores, customised credit cards up to five lacs etc. are positives. MSMEs will also be helped with clean tech manufacturing. These will be supplemented by hubs for toy manufacturing, footwear manufacturing, etc. The National Export Mission will elevate exports, particularly from SMEs & MSMEs, the biggest employment creator.

Support for setting up Global Capability Centres in tier II and tier III towns will develop those cities, unfold employment opportunities for budding professionals nearer home, provide relevant skills, reduce pressure on metro cities and boost investments from overseas. Numerous measures including 100% FDI in Insurance are envisaged to attract a larger amount of FDI.

Health, education and housing too have been allocated adequate resources with clearly outlined action plans. Cancer centers will be set up in all districts in three years and 200 will come up in FY 26. Hospitals and their facilities will be enhanced. The cost of a number of medicines is being brought down by reducing customs duties on intermediate goods. Gig workers will be provided with health cover. Broadband connections will be installed in all schools and Bharat Bhasha Scheme will make available textbooks in regional languages for better learning. Seats in medical colleges and IITs are being increased substantially. Another 40,000 affordable houses will be completed in FY26.

The assistance for shipbuilding and 100 greenfield airports adding 120 new destinations under the UDAN scheme, resources and facilitation for nuclear energy etc. will all go to build futuristic infrastructure. Adequate funds have been allocated for innovation, digital transformation, AI development and digital ecosystem to keep India in step with the world. Geo Spatial Mission should help modernize land records and urban planning.

Setting up the committee to contract regulatory cholesterol (which describes a universe of 1,536 laws, 69,233 compliances and 6,618 filings that businesses face at an aggregate, according to one finding) is a significant step. It comes with easier certifications and licensing, decriminalisation of over 100 legal provisions, simplification of taxation, Jan Vishwas 2.0 and single portal for KYC including periodical updating etc. It adds to ease of doing business and living and trust building.

There are deficiencies and inadequacies in the budget. Some of the States' wishes have remained unfulfilled but partnering can lead to double engine growth. When growth starts declining, economics prescribes the counter cyclical approach, of more spending rather than fiscal consolidation. However, global uncertainties encourage reserving some gunpowder to fight, unknowns. Within the given resources, an earnest attempt has been made to balance, and optimise.

(The writer is former chairman SEBI & LIC, and author of the books 'A Game Changer's Memoir' and 'The Essential Book of Corporate Governance') (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Emergence of a brand new "Hate Politics"

Editor,
Lately, we have seen a sudden shift in the political scenario in Meghalaya, especially in the eastern half of the state. A new brand of politics is emerging or unfolding, in my opinion, a politics inclining towards the Ultra-Left where ethno-centrism and neo-Marxism are the focal points. The other day I happened to come across a video where the President of the VPP was giving a speech in one of his election campaigns. He was trying to persuade the crowd by saying that his party is for the downtrodden and the poor whereas the NPP is for wealthy and affluent. After pondering for a while I can clearly see the motive of Ardent. This is a classic case of driving a wedge between the haves and the have nots of the state and this clearly translates to a tactic used commonly by the ultra-left to further extend their influence over the people.

Secondly, anti-establishment is another strategy of the ultra-left to oppose or challenge the existing power structure and coincidentally here the VPP is challenging the age old traditional institution i.e. The Dorbar Shnong. Thirdly, the criticism of the media for perpetrating fake news against the VPP clearly

indicates the haughtiness or egotism of its leaders. This is a major red flag if any so called political party is against the 'Fourth Pillar' of Democracy. Lastly, the VPP from time to time have been adopting strong arm methods which advocates protests, sit-ins and rallies in order to achieve its political goals. As a citizen, I am deeply concerned about this new political development in our state. Every individual has the right to ascribe to any political ideology they choose. I'm a Right winger myself, but I will never subscribe to any group or party that undermines the democratic ethos of our state.

Yours etc.,
W. Tariang
Via email

Proposal for naming & beautifying the Umiam bridge

Editor,
Our dam has been beautifully illuminated since last year, and with the water level remaining high for quite some time, it looks stunning at night. However, the bridge in Damsite has yet to receive an official name.

In contrast, the long bridge in Umroi, which overlooks the flyover, remains unlit and neglected. Despite attracting

numerous tourists who stop to take pictures, its paint has faded, and the solar lights are no longer functional.

I sincerely request the concerned authorities to designate a name for this bridge, repaint it, and install proper lighting, similar to the bridge at the dam. Additionally, the dam itself should have a clear identity—if it already has a name, a well-designed signboard should be placed to inform visitors of its existence and its year of construction.

Enhancing these landmarks will not only improve their visual appeal but also contribute to tourism and local pride.

Yours etc.,
B. Laitphlang
Via email

Inhuman mode of deportation

Editor
No nation can afford porous borders -- not in these dangerous times. Yet, given the harsh economic and political situations that many are fleeing, illegal immigration is a reality today. But not all illegal immigrants are escaping turmoil. Some are naked opportunists, who are seeking to exploit the generosity of western nations. One unrepentant deportee recently asserted that he would return to America again -- illegally. Then there is asylum fraud and birth tourism.

These are harsh realities. But they obscure the person for whom generous asylum policies were originally designed -- the genuine refugee, fleeing murder, mayhem, and torture.

Mr Trump, the new emperor of America is keeping his campaign promise of deporting illegal immigrants. But his actions raise at least three concerns. First and foremost, what is his motive? To protect America, or to boost his own image? My guess is, he is expressing the vengeful will of his voter base, relishing in the sadism of it all. Protecting America is just a side-effect. Is he racist in his actions? Prima facie -- no. He is simply doing his job as head of state. But what lies beneath the surface? Perhaps this deep-rooted fear of the Caucasian far right -- loss of the white identity, or demographic annihilation through illegal immigration from the global South. But second, even if his actions seem morally tenable, the hypocrisy of it all takes one's breath away. Mr. Trump, a convicted felon, is raising a storm over the illegality of it all, without stopping to distinguish the moral from the legal, or the horrific plight of the illegal immigrant in the hands of cartels, people smugglers, and violent thugs. When a felon tries to enforce the law, he does it with far greater harshness than anyone else.

If you want to enforce the

law, begin with neighboring nations. Make sure they prosecute the shady characters who send drugs and illegal immigrants to America. Then prosecute the US companies that hire illegal immigrants at substandard wages that no American citizen would accept -- even in a dream.

Finally, even a criminal has the right to human dignity. While some illegal immigrants are hardened criminals and deserve to be deported in handcuffs, etc., not all merit this substantive loss of dignity. Indians today have a bad reputation in the west -- as scammers par excellence. This does not mean Indians deserve the loss of dignity we saw recently in the deportation of 104 Indians who entered America illegally, or overstayed their visas. We do not know if they were scammers, or if they willfully meant to be illegal, or fell into this situation. American authoritarianism has always displayed itself at its harshest, in the treatment of its prison populations. So, we should not be surprised that these Indian deportees were handcuffed and shackled. One can only hope that Mr. Modi will raise this issue of the dignity of the deportee (Indian or otherwise) -- when he meets Mr. Trump in the near future. One can also hope that the Indian government will actively encourage economic opportunities and better infrastructure in India, so that young

Indians do not have to sacrifice so much to get here illegally, often risking their lives, livelihoods, and personal dignity. Finally, one hopes that should there be a second batch of Indian deportees, Mr. Modi will send an Indian plane to carry them back.

Indeed, immigration laws should always be enforced. The American laws are already generous enough. Nobody should exploit them. A nation is a home and not even a nation of immigrants like America can let anybody and everybody into their home. With the times being as dangerous as they are, even legal immigrants should be vetted carefully. But all this, and the deportations could be done more professionally -- without sadism, authoritarianism, or loss of human dignity. I remember sadistic and lawless border patrol personnel in the India of my youth, who would tear up the documents of frightened migrants fleeing into India from neighboring countries. This kind of sadism should always be protested.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

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

Climate vs weather models? It all comes down to chaos

Weather forecasts help you decide whether to go for a picnic, hang out your washing or ride your bike to work. They also provide warnings for extreme events, and predictions to optimise our power grid.

To achieve this, services such as the Australian Bureau of Meteorology use complex mathematical representations of Earth and its atmosphere - weather and climate models.

The same software is also used by scientists to predict our future climate in the coming decades or even centuries. These predictions allow us to plan for, or avoid, the impacts of future climate change.

Weather and climate models are highly complex. The Australian Community Climate and Earth System Simulator, for example, is comprised of millions of lines of computer code.

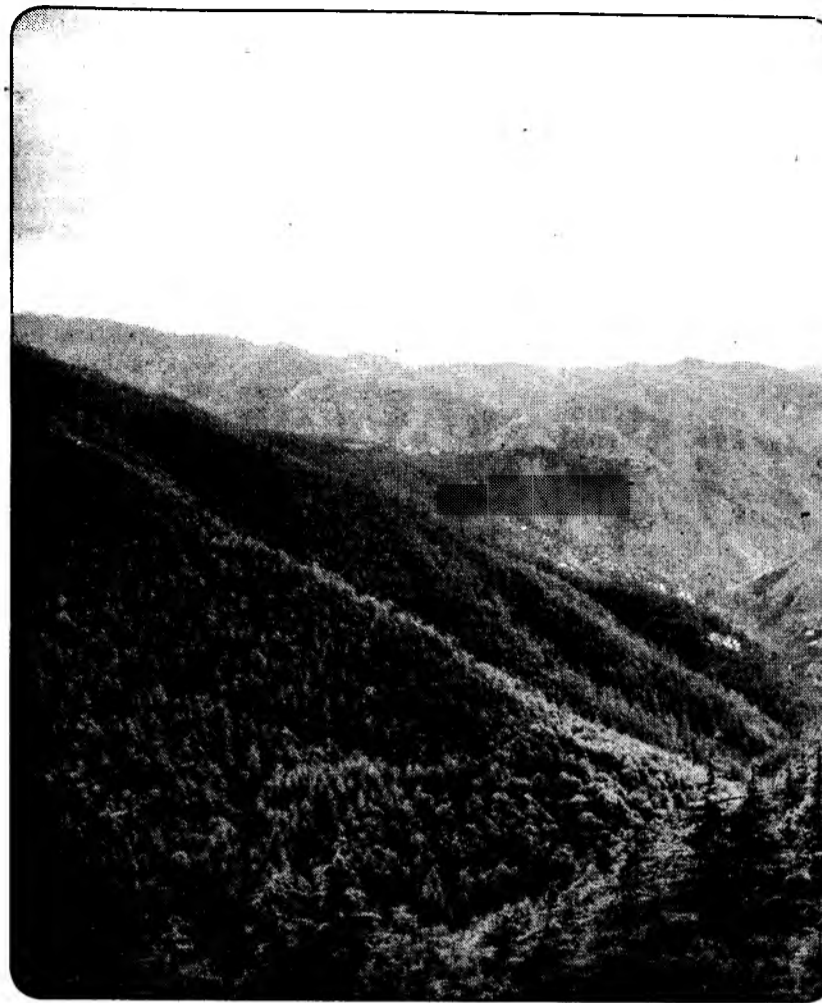
Without climate and weather models we would be flying blind, both for short-term weather events and for our long-term future. But how do they work - and how are they different? The same physical principles

Weather is the short-term behaviour of the atmosphere - the temperature on a given day, the wind, whether it's raining and how much. Climate is about long-term statistics of weather events - the typical temperature in summer, or how often thunderstorms or floods happen each decade.

The reason we can use the same modelling tools for both weather and climate is because they are both based on the same physical principles.

These models compile a range of factors - the Sun's radiation, air and water flow, land surface, clouds - into mathematical equations. These equations are solved on a bunch of tiny three-dimensional grid boxes and pieced together to predict the future state.

These boxes are sort of like pixels that come together to make the big picture.



These solutions are calculated on a computer - where using more grid boxes (finer resolution) gives better answers, but takes more computing resources. This is why the best predictions need a supercomputer, such as the National Computational Infrastructure's Gadi, located in Canberra. Because weather and climate are governed by the same physical processes, we can use the same software to predict the behaviour of both.

But there most of the similarities end.

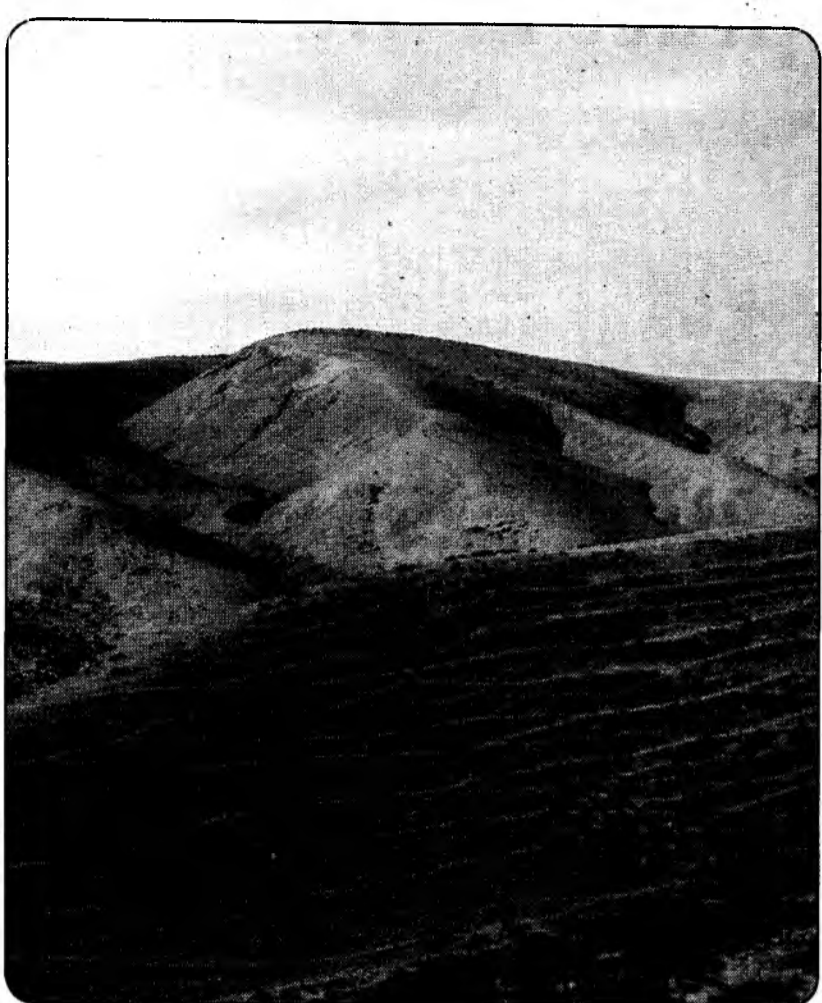
The starting point

The main differences between weather and climate come down to a single concept: "initialisation", or the starting point of a model.

In many cases, the simplest prediction for tomorrow's weather is the "persistence" forecast: tomorrow's weather will be similar to today. It means that, irrespective of how good your model is, if you start from the wrong conditions for today, you have no hope of predicting tomorrow.

Persistence forecasts are often quite good for temperature, but they're less effective for other aspects of weather such as rainfall or wind. Since these are often the most important aspects of weather to predict, meteorologists need more sophisticated methods.

So, weather models use complex mathematics to create models that include weather information (from yesterday and



today) and then make a good prediction of tomorrow. These predictions are a big improvement on persistence forecasts, but they won't be perfect.

In addition, the further ahead you try to predict, the more information you forget about the initial state and the worse your forecast performs. So you need to regularly update and rerun (or, to use modelling parlance, "initialise") the model to get the best prediction.

Weather services today can reliably predict three to seven days ahead, depending on the region, the season and the type of weather systems involved.

Chaos reigns

If we can only accurately predict weather systems about a

week ahead before chaos takes over, climate models have no hope of predicting a specific storm next century.

Instead, climate models use a completely different philosophy. They aim to produce the right type and frequency of weather events, but not a specific forecast of the actual weather.

The cumulative effect of these weather events produces the climate state. This includes factors such as the average temperature and the likelihood of extreme weather events.

So, a climate model doesn't give us an answer based on weather information from yesterday or today - it is run for centuries to produce its own equilibrium for a simulated Earth.

Because it is run for so long, a climate (also known as Earth system) model will need to account for additional, longer-term processes not factored into weather models, such as ocean circulation, the cryosphere (the frozen portions of the planet), the natural carbon cycle and carbon emissions from human activities.

The additional complexity of these extra processes, combined with the need for century-long simulations, means these models use a lot of computing power. Constraints on computing means that we often include fewer grid boxes (that is, lower resolution) in climate models than weather models.

A machine learning revolution? Is there a faster way?

Enormous strides have been made in the past couple of years to predict the weather with machine learning. In fact, machine learning-based models can now outperform physics-based models.

But these models need to be trained. And right now, we have insufficient weather observations to train them. This means their training still needs to be supplemented by the output of traditional models.

And despite some encouraging recent attempts, it's not clear that machine learning models will be able to simulate future climate change. The reason again comes down to training - in particular, global warming will shift the climate system to a different state for which we have no observational data whatsoever to train or verify a predictive machine learning model.

Now more than ever, climate and weather models are crucial digital infrastructure. They are powerful tools for decision makers, as well as research scientists. They provide essential support for agriculture, resource management and disaster response, so understanding how they work is vital. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 9, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-sextile Jupiter on your solar return chart thus resulting in an excellent year ahead. You will appear noble and sober. And your conduct will be gentle. You will impress your peers and superiors and they will help you a lot. Your behavior will win you lot of friends and admirers. You will also get a chance to meet lot of influential persons who will help you immensely in times to come. Those appearing for exams or interviews too would get success. You could also get involved with a person at your workplace. He/she will be a person of redefined taste and very gentle. Marriage ties can be possible with the consent of family members.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Self-confidence and action are highlighted and you tend to instinctively know the right course of action to take in most situations. Good work opportunities crop up for those working with overseas connections. You probably should be prudent as there is a tendency to create financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. At times you feel fun loving, energetic, and willing to explore new ideas. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Economy in the home and management of manpower and finances at work keep you in control of situations. You further your business by expanding in related fields of activity with good chances of collaborations. You would have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. You would have more opportunities to improve relations with relatives, friends and loved ones. You take on a dreamy and philosophical outlook. Your hobbies, leisure time and time spent with children come into focus. Give yourself a fitness routine and healthy diet program.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This week brings harmonious relations with friends, colleagues, loved ones, family and children. You will be able to make best use of your talents, work experience and would insert your creativity into your work and projects in hand. You would be more determined and diligent. On the financial front, progress would be steady and solid. The need to express and communicate your ideas is extremely important to you during this period. Your domestic life takes on top priority. Making yourself feel comfortable and secure is paramount, and you have every chance to boost your feeling of stability and support of the family. You may be tempted to spend extra money on material goods.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Good financial returns are on the cards as your meticulous planning pays off. A promotion at work or gainful business opportunity starts. You win many a point with your dynamic energy and communication skills. Your personal charm and charisma take you through complicated situations. You would spend a lot of money on clothes, furniture, and entertainment. Domestic relationships and the home environment would be harmonious and peaceful. This is an excellent period in which you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships with loved ones.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Professional situations turn in your favor. You would be able to face truths, deal with emotional choices and difficult situations. You would be able to integrate forces, resources and professional aspects to achieve. With mastery in your field you meet deadlines. Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. It is best to accept challenges that life offers you and keep going through ups and downs realizing that this too shall pass. You would be compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives and earn respect from them. There will be a fluctuation in moods before a balance is achieved.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) Activities related to communication such as journalism, literature and fine arts are prominent. You would successfully use your charm and your sense of humor to make peace and harmony in personal and professional relations. Romance brings a sense of belonging and feeling

of security. You exhibit an ability to adapt to most situations. You would be willing to adapt to new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. News and visitors from far off places are likely to arrive. You are nurturing and caring in personal relationships. You are blessed with good mood and health for most of the week.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Excellent opportunities for people in show business, entertainment and related fields are in the offing. You would work more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You have been more determined and hard working and this brings fulfillment of all desires particularly in your personal and domestic life. Your personal charm and attractiveness would have a positive effect on your relationships. Others are willing to help and cooperate with your goals and ambitions. It would be better to go for long-term investments and speculations for financial gains.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You would use your talent and knowledge together in personal and professional life. You would get familiar with new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. Strong existing relationships are likely to grow and transform. You would also form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. This is a favorable period for people in fine arts, hospitality and other related fields. It's a great time to exert your personal influence, as you are coming across as especially cooperative and graceful.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) It's a very favorable time for developing your relationships with parents and other relatives. Personal relations are precious and need to be treated with tender love and care. New ideas and concepts floated by you at your work place will be appreciated. You may take up new assignments and project that would bring creativity and invention of new ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. This is a good time for teachers, salespersons and those in related fields of communication.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would be able to maintain balance of the head and heart in professional and in personal relations. Family is supportive, children are loving and friends extend hospitality and love. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You are more willing to adapt to new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. You are able to find creative solutions to problems now. It is a good time to organize your workplace, tools and thoughts. This would help you to get a better perspective to achieve desired goals.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Your courage and confidence will keep your hopes alive. You can attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and connect with seniors at work. Increased energy and a renewed feeling of confidence favor you. Take advantage of time and utilize your energy accordingly. There's nothing wrong with a bit of self-centeredness. You are highly motivated to make money which enhances your energy for new moneymaking projects. You might spend a lot of time in making short frequent trips, visiting friends and relatives. Activities related to communications such as journalism, literature and fine arts are highlighted.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) A wonderful professional opportunity takes you towards success. A personal meeting will lead to romance, love and a long lasting relationship. There are chances of new associations and beginnings as new opportunities and changes may come. Your family would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. You would take up assignments and projects which would end on a winning note for you. Your efforts to reach out to new people will be accepted and welcomed as you get success in foreign matters too. Physical energy and good health enable you to incorporate a busy schedule and work commitments.

Sleep disorders highly individual, AI must for diagnosing: Neurologist

Artificial intelligence will be essential for diagnosing sleep disorders such as sleep apnoea or insomnia, which are increasingly acquiring an individual character, neurologist Dr Manvir Bhatia said.

Further, once diagnosed, are we able to say that a certain individual will be a good user of the treatment or not? That's where the role of AI is really going to come up, said Dr Bhatia, the vice-president of Indian Society for Sleep Research.

She was addressing a workshop conducted at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, ahead of the 11th Congress of Asian Sleep Research Society that will be held here during February 8-9.

Obstructive sleep apnoea is a common disorder, estimated to affect about a billion worldwide. Muscles in the throat narrow the airways, thereby affecting one's breathing and blood oxygen levels.

A 2023 study by the AIIMS estimated that 104 million Indians of working age suffer from obstructive sleep apnoea, of whom nearly 50 per cent have it moderate or severe.

First line of treatment usually includes PAP or 'positive airway pressure', in which pressured air is delivered to the patient via a mask to keep the upper airway open, thereby preventing 'apnoea' or breaks in breathing.

"It's ok that the technology will be to say about the usage of PAP. But are we able to say that a certain individual will be a good user of the treatment or not, similar to how we are now able to predict one's risk of having a stroke or a cardiac event? That's where the role of AI is really going to come up -- in predicting one's PAP compliance," said Dr Bhatia, who runs Neurology and Sleep Centre in New Delhi.

While sleep has been studied extensively over the years, the focus has largely been on AHI (apnoea-hypopnoea index) and sleep stages because the human eye could see only so much, according to the neurologist. AHI measures how often one's breathing stops or slows down.

She added that as sleep technology becomes more compact and sophisticated, and the recorded information more granular and voluminous, arti-

ficial intelligence will be almost indispensable for analysing the data.

"There's no way that the human mind can analyse all this data," the neurologist said.

"Sleep disorders are very heterogeneous in nature, be it sleep apnoea or insomnia -- there must be something that we are missing. It's never one treatment or diagnostic method that fits all and that's why, we definitely need to incorporate AI into sleep medicine," she said.

Dr Bhatia also acknowledged the resistance of medical doctors in turning away from how sleep studies have been traditionally conducted towards newer technologies.

A traditional sleep study or a polysomnography uses wires and sensors attached to a participant to measure physiological activity, including brain waves, breathing and heart rates, and oxygen levels during sleep.

However, polysomnography is expensive and "technology, technique, and technician dependent", Dr Bhatia said.

Further, the sensors on the body can interfere and "if you're trying to assess someone's sleep, are we really doing a good job?", she added.

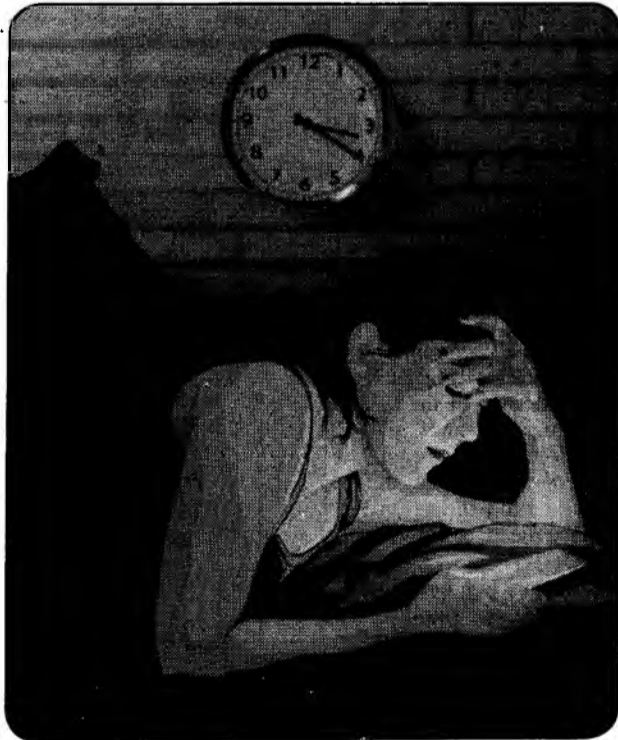
Home sleep testing devices, including patches, therefore, can be comfortable, convenient and less tech-heavy, Dr Bhatia said.

She also pointed out that consumer wearable technologies, including smartwatches, are increasingly highlighting the importance of sleep, even though data may not be accurate.

"People are becoming very conscious. The devices are creating an awareness that sleep is important," Dr Bhatia said.

However, she cautioned these wearable devices are different from those used for medically diagnosing sleep disorders. She also advised taking an "overall, temporal" view of the information provided by wearables, rather than diving deep into a "night-by-night" analysis.

"Sleep apnoea is a highly prevalent condition, with serious comorbidities and consequences. No way are we going to be able to diagnose so many people using traditional systems, even though they will continue to have a place," Dr Bhatia said in conclusion. (PTI)



"The only way to enjoy anything in this life is to earn it first."

—Ginger Rogers

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 179 SHILLONG, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2025

A pyrrhic victory

THE BJP is evidently euphoric. It seized power in Delhi after remaining on the sidelines for 27 years. The Aam Aadmi Party of Arvind Kejriwal has been ejected from power and Kejriwal himself tasted defeat along with his close associates. The AAP's vote tally went down to 43 percent from the 53 percent five years ago. Even as the AAP had managed to wrest power in Punjab too, the party's loss in its home turf -- where it was born out of a spirited campaign against corruption some 12 years ago -- is stark. The emerging situations might conspire to unseat the AAP from power in Punjab too.

Notably, AAP and Arvind Kejriwal had struggled hard to erase the stigma of corruption vis a vis the Delhi Liquor Scam. The BJP's aggressive postures against this regional party are well-documented. Both Kejriwal as chief minister and his deputy Manish Sisodia had been arrested, jailed and bundled out of their posts in the aftermath of the liquor scam. They were painted as epitomes of corruption. The main charge against them was that they tweaked the state's liquor policy and obtained pecuniary benefits from the liquor lobby. Obviously, other parties do the same. Inferences were that the AAP collected and used such funds to fight assembly elections in Goa. Note similar speculations about the BJP itself in some of the states -- Chhattisgarh for instance -- where the liquor lobby allegedly funded the party's polls. In fact, the liquor lobby funds every party's polls in every state. Even the CAG findings about huge fund mis-management or misappropriation by the Modi government in relation to the National Highway contracts had raised eyebrows. The weak opposition failed to pursue such leads. Admittedly, all these cannot be cited as excuses for what Kejriwal and his party did. An enterprise that flourished under the anti-corruption plank could ill afford to land in such unenviable situations.

Consider what the BJP has offered to the electorate in Delhi this time -- a dole of Rs 2,500 to poor women and senior citizens; an assistance of Rs 21,000 to pregnant women, subsidized gas cylinders for homes etc -- more enticing promises compared to what the AAP offered. It is safe to assume that the poor fell for these. Note also the signals that the BJP sent to the salaried class and their families in the run-up to the voting day -- in the form of the raising of income tax ceiling to Rs 14 lakh from Rs 7 lakh. The Modi government scandalously decided to forgo more than 1 lakh crore in revenue to the national exchequer a year by way of tax exemptions; thereby excluding some 95 per cent of the population from the IT bracket. All things considered, what the BJP achieved in Delhi is a pyrrhic victory as far as national interests are concerned.

ADCs continue to be mere springboards

By H H Mohrmen

The election to the Autonomous District Councils of the state is at its crescendo, and everything is at stake for the candidates and the parties in the fray. The election this time is interesting because of the emergence of the new political party. It is a crucial election because it is a make-or-break situation for the party. The VPP hopes the election will be a springboard because if the party wins the ADCs, then it can see itself as a contender for the bigger political platform. Otherwise, it might as well consider that the party's journey ends before it even begins. The ADC election is crucial for other parties and candidates too for the same reason because it serves as a springboard for the parties and the candidates to the legislative assembly.

The UDP Manifesto
Reading the news reports about the manifestos of the different political parties, one of the main issues the UDP has identified is to do away with Para 12 (A). This indeed is a very important issue for the district council elections, but the same party is in the government, but did not take issue at the government level. In many cases, the same MDCs are also later elected as MLAs who forget the same Para altogether when they are in the assembly. The other equally important issue mentioned in the party's manifesto is the Governor's delay in giving assent to the bills passed by the ADCs. The Governor acts on the advice of the State Government, so the question is why the party needs to take the issue to the public when the same can be discussed at the level of the Government to which the party is also a part. As a person who works with the differently-abled people, the move to allocate 3% job reservation for differently-abled people is very much appreciated, but the Party can even go a notch higher and fight for the same allocation at the state level. The differently-abled people in the state are a neglected lot, as many of them have not been provided what is rightfully theirs.

Article 371 is a non-issue
The debate on Article 371 is all hypothetical; between the Sixth Schedule and the Article, it is like crying for

the moon without considering the ground on which one stands. The VPP is banking heavily on the issue of Article 371 and even promised that the issue will be taken by the MP in the parliament. But everybody knows that it is difficult, if not impossible, for one MP to convince the entire parliament to even discuss the subject. My opinion is we can discuss the issue only if there is a possibility of having a huge majority in the parliament or if at all we have a State Government that can convince the Central Government to bring the amendment. As of now it is just an election issue for the party, and the less we talk about it the better. It is a complete waste of time to even debate the issue because not a single party in the state will, at any time in the future, have the influence or the majority to be able to convince the parliament to bring the change in the Constitution. The nearest example for us is the Naga issue, and in spite of the support they have from the people and the struggle that had taken them many decades with many lives lost during the insurgency, the issue still hangs fire. Debating about 371 now is like what Bah Prestone Tynsong had said: "Ngi pnybieit man ka san snem, ki ngop ruh man ka san snem" (We fool them every five years, and they also fall for it every time).

Election like any other
The change, if at all there is a change, is from bad to worse, and it started from the day the candidates filed their nomination papers. This year the numbers of supporters accompanying the candidates while filing their nominations have increased and are in their thousands. Jowai center was jam-packed with the different candidate's supporters who came in all kinds of vehicles and caused a traffic jam in the town.

The situation is much worse on the day of the scrutiny for the candidate's papers. Their supporters in the thousands accompanied almost all the candidates as if it was a day for the counting of votes. Supporters will definitely have to spend money to

accompany their candidates for the filing of nomination and to come to the place where the scrutiny of the papers of their candidates was held. The question is who sponsored their trip?

VPP candidates can claim that their supporters came on their own, and other political parties will also say the same. The question, however, for the VPP is what is the objective of bringing a crowd even during the filing of nomination and scrutiny for papers if not a show of strength? Even if we are to believe that the supporters of the VPP candidates pay their own way to the center, it defeats the very principle the party stands for: not to fool people or take them for a ride. Why is there a need to bring supporters to the center if it is not for a show of strength? If the party is serious about eradicating corruption from the state, it should stop unnecessary spending during the election.

If the VPP as its chief claims is here to educate the public, it should have prevented such unnecessary spending of money and wasting of time for the common people. They should have advised their supporters to spend their time gainfully, as the crowd has nothing to do with the scrutiny of papers.

There is no difference in campaign style either; all indulge in the same style of hiring vehicles to ferry people from one campaign ground to another, installing pandals, hiring high-frequency sounds, and decorating the same, which of course has some cost. No party can do without it, and spending money during elections is the root cause of corruption. The test for the new party is to walk the talk and show to the voters of the state that it is a party with a difference; that they mean business and they are here to stay.

Holier-than-thou attitude
However, there is a common observation, which is unfavorable for the party. It is alleged that the general supporters of the VPP tend to behave like they are the only saviours of the jaidbyrniew. As such they become arrogant and consider all op-

positions who obstruct them from achieving their goals as enemies. The truth is many love the jaidbyrniew and have tried to serve the state and its people in their own ways and as much as they can, but can they be treated as enemies just because they don't think alike? Amongst the supporters of this party, now it is the 'they/them' and 'us' divide. It is our way or the highway kind of attitude. The party's supporters even claim that now the fight is between 'the light' and 'darkness,' which is a very dangerous perception to hold because it considers others inferior.

The pride is seen in the way the party's politics is constructed, which is a politics of confrontation almost at every front. Anybody who has an opinion different from theirs is considered an enemy, be it the press fraternity, the traditional heads, anybody who hold opinions different from that of the party's are considered opponents. The response of the youth wings to the demand of the press club for the party's supremacy to apologize is a classic case in point. The party's youth response is amusing, if not dangerous, when they said the reason that the demand should not be responded to is because the letter from the media seeking apology from the VPP was signed by a non-tribal person. One of the signatories of the letter is a non-tribal duly elected by the press fraternity to hold the post. Is the party going to try to interfere even in the election of the press club if voted to power? On a similar note will they allow their leader to pay heed if he is being summoned by a non-tribal officer or a non-tribal judge?

By dividing the public into the 'us' and 'them,' the party is taking the hoi-polloi on a dangerous and slippery path, and a divided Khasi Jaintia population will not augur well even for the future of the party. The VPP's only strength lies in the Khasi Jaintia region, and if, like what happened now, the party is in a confrontational mode with many sections of the society, then the party's future is in jeopardy. A divided Khasi Jaintia region will not help the party catapult itself to the state assembly.

Understanding Transfer of Government Land to Non-Tribal Entity

By Kenneth Nongsiej

The question of transferring tribal land from a tribal to a natural non-tribal is a well-settled law, and it is prohibited under Section 3 as well as exempted under Section 11 of the Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971. The term tribal is mentioned in the Constitution of India, the Land Transfer Act, the United Khasi Jaintia Hills District (Trading by Non-Tribals) Regulation, 1954, etc., but the dedicated/separate article or section for the non-tribal definition is limited.

The term non-tribal can include a natural person and a juristic person. Section 2(6) of the Trading by Non-Tribal Regulation, 1954, states that the term "non-tribal" shall be construed accordingly. This article will explore the understanding of the transfer of government land through judicial verdict.

We know that land is a sensitive topic in our state, and its unique land tenure system makes it different from other parts of the country. Since development is linked with the relationship between government, tribal and non-tribal, there have been numerous debates on the issues of land and development. The question had arisen that land can be transferred to a corporation/company/juristic person as they are in the category of non-tribal entities, but they are not a natural person. This question can be answered by

arises whether government land in a Scheduled Area can be allotted to a non-tribal entity. The Samatha judgement provides a clear answer: the Constitution empowers the state to acquire, hold, and dispose of land, while the Governor has the personal responsibility of maintaining peace and governance in Scheduled Areas. Para 5(2)(b) of the Fifth Schedule states that the "Governor" can regulate land allotment but also prohibits its transfer to non-tribal, including corporations.

This means that even government land in Scheduled Areas cannot be leased, sold, or transferred to a non-tribal entity, whether it is a natural person or a juristic person such as a company or corporation. The court further clarified that the word "person" in Section 3(1)(a) of the Regulation includes natural persons, juristic persons, and the government itself. Government land should be allotted only to tribal, either individually or through cooperative societies composed solely of tribal. The state's sole power to dispose of land under Article 298 is subject to the Fifth Schedule's restrictions. In simple terms, the State Government cannot lease or transfer land in a Scheduled Area to a non-tribal entity except in cases where it serves a tribal welfare purpose through tribal-owned cooperatives

"The term non-tribal can include a natural person and a juristic person. Section 2(6) of the Trading by Non-Tribal Regulation, 1954, states that the term 'non-tribal' shall be construed accordingly."

the judicial verdict in the case of Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh and Ors. (1997) 8 Supreme Court Cases 191: 1997 SCC OnLine SC 229). To understand this case, let us divide it into different parts:

Land for the tribal
Here the court has observed that it is the most important natural and valuable asset and imperishable endowment from which the tribal derive their sustenance, social status, economic and social equality, permanent place of abode and work, and living. It is a security and source of economic empowerment. Therefore, the tribes too have great emotional attachment to their lands. The land on which they live and till assures them equality of status and dignity of person and means to economic and social justice and is a potent weapon of economic empowerment in a social democracy. Looking at the observation of the Court, we can understand that even though the judgement was pronounced in the year 1997, it is still relevant to the context of our state.

Fifth and Sixth schedule
In this observation, the court relied upon the judgement of Waman Rao v. Union of India. The court in this case observed that the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution of India are to protect the tribal from exploitation and to preserve the value of the land for the economic empowerment of the tribal. The most important part of this judgement is that para 5(2) of the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution and the Regulations is to impose a total prohibition of the transfer of immovable property to any person other than a tribal for peace and proven good management of a tribal area and to protect the possession, right, title, and interest of the members of the Scheduled Tribes held in the land at one time by the tribal.

Government land
Companies or corporations, though not natural persons, are considered juristic persons in law. This means they have legal rights, including the ability to sue and be sued. The question then

or government instrumentalities.

Section 105 of the Transfer of Property Act defines a lease as a transfer of rights, granting the lessee possession and enjoyment of the property for a specified period. Since a lease creates a legal interest in land, its transfer falls under the same restrictions as ownership transfers. Renewal of a lease is considered a fresh lease grant, meaning it is also prohibited if given to a non-tribal entity. This interpretation prevents indirect land transfers through long-term leasing arrangements, ensuring that tribal land remains with tribals.

Way forward from the judgement

The Samatha case provides a balanced solution to promote development and investment in tribal areas while safeguarding tribal rights. The Sixth Schedule aims to prevent exploitation of tribals and ensure their social, educational, economic, and political empowerment. The Constitution mandates that tribal land should remain with tribals. Even government land should be allotted only to tribals, whether individually or through cooperative societies, and used for their development and welfare. This ruling reinforces that tribal land cannot be leased or transferred to non-tribals, including corporations, except under strictly regulated conditions benefiting the tribal community.

By following this observation the state can ensure sustainable development without displacing tribals; through legal clarity in land transfers, and stronger safeguards against exploitation. The Samatha judgement remains a landmark ruling that protects tribal land rights while allowing for responsible development through tribal-owned enterprises. Meghalaya must continue to uphold these constitutional safeguards to prevent land alienation and ensure economic empowerment for its tribal communities.

Letters to the Editor

Who do we choose in Meghalaya?

Editor,
This is not about the Autonomous District Council elections coming up in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, but nevertheless relevant.

After all these years (was it almost two decades?), the Congress party seems to not have learnt anything. It's sad that at this critical stage of the country's political journey, this major national party has failed to live up to the people's aspirations. INDIA bloc was a short-lived euphoria among the masses, a euphoria that ultimately boiled down to the politicians; even I have forgotten, and will forget after this post, what INDIA in the bloc stands for! My personal experience in the INC many moons back, was it was a national party, with a regional outlook, but operates with a strong sycophancy at all levels.

It seems that this sycophancy is still the case at the national level, as it is in Meghalaya. So where do we Meghalayans turn to?

A national alternative is the BJP, but this will never have the numbers that count in the Meghalaya assembly, at least in the near, or further-near future! And it's anti-Muslim, anti-Christian, anti-minority, one culture, one language etc. stance will find no majority takers in the hill regions of this part of India.

Another alternative is the NPP (another just-about-national party) which is in power now in Meghalaya. The actual people-supported strength of NPP is in the districts of Garo Hills. One can't say that there is people-support for the NPP in Khasi and Jaintia hills - as I see it, it's all about the money and the barons and the profiting sycophants.

So are the regional parties like UDP, HSPDP, VPP and others an alternative? Parties like the UDP, I've, for a long time, coined as a parasite party. They work together in a national party led government, curse the party in the elections, and then slide in to join the same government led by the same party - and you know what? They always say it for the sake of stability, but as one of their senior office-bearers confided to me (and it's no secret), and I quote him, "If we are not in the government, our future is gone." Please read 'future' as 'career,' as that is what representing a constituency has become! So, so different from the political scenario in my time, the 80s!

A special mention about the young maiden, VPP. WOW! What a party! Hardly out of the womb and they captured the whole of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and birthed an MP. What a ray of hope the VPP was, and I wonder whether that ray of hope has now been extinguished with its arrogant opposition to the authority like the Dorbar Shnong, and the sycophancy that appears to have crept

in, in its organisation. A party that I had publicly said I would have been comfortable with. There's still time to turn the sails of the boat and survive, unlike the Congress that is already struggling to stay above water.

Yours etc.,
Eugene Thomas,
Via email

Appalling road conditions near Nazareth hospital and Nongrimmaw

Editor,
While walking near Laitumkhrak, I noticed a large pothole just outside Nazareth Hospital that has remained unaddressed for nearly a month. It makes me wonder how it formed and why no action has been taken to fill it. The inconvenience it causes is frustrating, but more importantly, it poses a serious risk—especially for patients in ambulances. The impact of a sudden bump while trying to manoeuvre around or over this pothole is something that should not be overlooked.

Beyond this, the road leading to Nongrimmaw, particularly towards Assam Rifles (DGAR), is in an appalling state. With winter being a dry season, it is concerning that the road has yet to be repaired. If maintenance isn't carried out soon, the arrival of the rainy season will make the situation even worse, turning the

road into an impassable mess. I hope authorities address these urgent repairs before it becomes a much bigger problem.

Yours etc.,
B. Laitphlang,
Via email

Media cannot disseminate fake news

Editor,
The editorial "Media and Politics" (ST February 6, 2025) made interesting reading. Nipping the attempts to sow the seeds of communalism and racism among media persons in the bud is crucial. Promoting communalism and racism among different communities and ethnic groups, could lead to social unrest and violence. Media has the power to foster unity and promote a sense of community by highlighting shared values and experiences. Communalism and racism can lead to biased reporting, which distorts facts and misleads the public. Ensuring unbiased and fair reporting helps maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of the media. Ethical journalism involves reporting news without prejudice or discrimination, focusing on truth and accuracy. Media persons should set an example by practicing and promoting ethical standards, discouraging any form of communalism or racism. Communal and racist narratives can harm vulnerable groups, leading to discrimination, marginalisation and violence. In fact,

the media should strive to give equal representation to all communities, ensuring that their voice is heard and respected.

A free and fair media is essential for an informed public, which is the cornerstone of a healthy democracy. By addressing these issues at an early stage, we can ensure that the media plays a positive role in promoting social cohesion, accurate reporting, ethical journalism and a strong democratic society.

Dealing with YouTubers, who sensationalize and misinform the public requires a multifaceted approach. Some steps to address this issue are: (1) encourage media literacy education in schools and communities to help people critically evaluate the content they consume (2) there is need to raise awareness about the impact of misinformation and the importance of verifying information from credible sources (3) advocate for stricter content policies on platforms like YouTube to ensure that misleading and sensational content is identified and removed (4) support government regulations that hold content creators accountable for spreading misinformation (5) support and promote fact-checking organizations that can debunk false information and provide accurate content and use platform reporting mechanisms to flag content that is misleading or harmful.

It's critical to ensure that content creators adhere to a code of ethics that emphasizes accuracy, fairness and

responsibility. Apart from this there is a need to create incentives for content creators who produce high-quality, factual content, such as awards, sponsorships and partnerships. For the sake of public accountability there is a need to engage with YouTube communities to foster a culture of accountability and discourage the spread of sensational and misleading content.

Public pressure and campaigns to encourage YouTube and other platforms to take stronger actions against misinformation is the need of the hour. In cases where misinformation causes significant harm legal actions such as defamation lawsuits to hold content creators accountable are required. It's important to promote and support alternative sources of quality content that provide accurate and reliable information and encourage credible content creators to continue producing fact-based content and reach wider audiences.

By combining these strategies, we can work towards reducing the impact of sensationalized and misleading content on YouTube and other platforms. We have to ward off the modern boogymen and the fourth estate can play a positive role in doing so.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

"Out of difficulties grow miracles."

— Jean de la Bruyere

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No.180 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2025

Conflict of Interests

CONFLICT of interest is taken for granted in Meghalaya. A businessperson contests the State Assembly or ADC election and uses that position to further his/her business interest. Let's take one example. The former minister in charge of PHED was also a contractor and the Jal Jeevan Mission scheme was implemented during his tenure. The present Deputy Chief Minister is part of a construction company and his firm carries out road and other construction in the state. Is it possible for the government to act fairly while awarding contracts for road construction when a minister's company is also a tenderer? It is unfortunate that this aspect of corruption has never been the subject of public debate when it should have been a priority.

A priori it is wrong for a businessperson to enter politics for the simple reason that the person's first priority is his/her business. All claims about serving the public is hogwash which has been used to brainwash people over decades. In the past Meghalaya had full time politicians who only relied on businesspersons to fund them during elections. Quite a few MLAs were college professors and were independent minded in the positions they took. They would not have supported the illegal coal trade as the MDA Government has done without batting an eyelid and using the entire state machinery to further this illegal trade where individuals benefit at the cost of the state which is losing over Rs 600 crores of annual revenue. Conflict of interest is when a person uses his/her position to further personal interests over public interests. A quick look at the affidavits filed by sitting MLAs and MDCs informs us of their wealth status. Not a single one of them knows the meaning of poverty simply because they don't come from poor households. An MLA from a distant constituency of Meghalaya's rural outback owns land in the elite localities of Shillong and in the New Shillong Township. All these have been acquired because of the positions they hold. Some ministers in the present government own hundreds of acres of land which they have managed to purchase from clans and communities. A research into the land ownership system of the Khasi-Jaintia people will reveal major faultlines where some clans own hectares of land and other clans are landless. Where is the egalitarianism that Khasis speak of with such pride? Would an egalitarian society have amongst its folds landless members who do not even own a simple homestead for a shelter. And even if they do have a shelter they are all bundled into a single room that doubles up as a kitchen and bedroom all in one?

This is the stark reality of Meghalaya but those in politics are inured and distanced from these realities. Yet we expect them to make policies that will address these gross inequities? For the political class the more disempowered people are the easier it is to win votes by bribing them during election time and reducing them to slavishly dependent voters. Which political party will challenge this inequitable rule of the affluent by the affluent for the affluent since there is not a single poor MLA among the 60 elected members?

Article 371 vs. Sixth Schedule in ADC elections: 'Why the uproar?'

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) elections are almost upon us. While there has been a great deal of mudslinging and rhetoric used by the political parties against their opponents, it is important that whichever party were to win; they do not distort the mandate of the Sixth Schedule. The Sixth schedule is a constitutional provision whose design was very much inspired by Rev. James Joy Mohan Nichols Roy, a Khasi who along with Jaipal Singh Munda fought for it against attempts made to incorporate the indigenous communities within the mainstream. There were remarks made in the Constituent Assembly for allowing non-indigenous individuals to buy land in indigenous territories as part of the process of assimilation. Fortunately, the arguments made by Rev. JMM Nichols Roy and JP Singh could convince BR Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, who supported autonomy and self-governance for the indigenous communities.

Similar protection for indigenous peoples also exists in other constitutional provisions like 371 A of Nagaland, which was the outcome of the 16 Framework agreement signed between the Naga People's Convention and the Government of India in 1960. This agreement laid the foundation for the creation of the state of Nagaland, granting it special status under Article 371A of the Indian Constitution. This special constitutional provision reads: (1) Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, (a) No Act of Parliament in respect of (i) religious or social practices of the Nagas, (ii) Naga customary law and procedure, (iii) administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law, (iv) ownership and transfer of land and its resources, shall apply to the State of Nagaland unless the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland by a resolution so decides. The focus here, again, is on the supremacy of customary law and its independence from any external intervention. Does it mean that Nagaland can make laws under the Union list and Concurrent list and the Union Government cannot question them? No, it only provides it independence in matters of customary law, nothing more. These special rights protect only customary practices, the foundation of the Naga identity. However, in areas such as defence, foreign affairs, atomic energy, currency (Union List), criminal law, criminal procedure, economic and social planning, and legal, medical, and other professions (Concurrent List), the Union government maintains supremacy. So,

the exceptionalism does not extend beyond customary laws. This mirrors the Sixth Schedule's provisions.

The Sixth Schedule empowers Autonomous District Councils to make laws on certain specified matters including land, forests, canal water, shifting cultivation, village administration, inheritance of property, marriage and divorce, and social customs. Here again, customary laws are prioritised, except that paragraph 12A grants the state legislature ultimate lawmaking authority. In case of a clash between laws made by the ADC and the State Legislature of Meghalaya, the state law shall prevail. The question is whether there is any case the state government has struck a law based on customary practices made by the Autonomous District Councils down? I don't know of any and it is likely that it has never happened. The explanation is very simple. Meghalaya is an indigenous ST majority state and legislators have overwhelmingly come from among the indigenous Khasi and Garo communities. The same parties that are part of the state legislature are also present in the ADCs. Also, because most of the state's population is indigenous, attempts to dilute customary laws will face electoral consequences. So, I am waiting to find instances of when there has been an attempt by the state legislature to bring provisions to dilute the customary laws of the Khasi and Garo, which necessitates a change in the governance framework? If not, is the demand of 371 simply an attempt to agitate people unnecessarily to gain political advantage? After all, managing headlines and maintaining constant agitation can serve as convenient excuses for concealing an inability to truly govern. If people are always distracted, they wouldn't really ask hard questions on issues of governance. They will just create imaginary enemies and blame them for all the problems, while business as usual continues.

What about the Union Government? Has it ever brought legislations and imposed on the indigenous communities of the state in contravention to the customary laws? Recent experience reveals that the Union Government (whichever party was in power) has been mindful of diluting the rights of the indigenous communities. The government excluded the Sixth Schedule areas from the CAA's ambit upon its introduction. The recent UCC debate proposes to exclude indigenous ST communities. Uttarakhand implemented the UCC, but

it excludes ST communities. The government of Meghalaya has already expressed its disapproval of adopting UCC. The Chief Minister Conrad Sangma stated that they will only accept such a legislation if the aim is to make everyone in the country follow matrilineal customs, which is the bedrock of Khasi and Garo identity. I completely agree with him. Why should others force us to follow non-Khasi customs when, for thousands of years, we have not only strongly held onto our matrilineal traditions but have also always tried to make others adopt them?

Khasis have always been zealous about conserving their matrilineal identity despite the very changes that have been taking place both within and around them. A very important event in Khasi history was the annexation of Jaintiapur by Hima Sutnga, which then became Hima Jaintiapur and was a powerful kingdom in the pre-colonial period. The founding of the new kingdom also brought the War-Amwi (who later became Pnar as the language evolved) in contact with the patrilineal Hindu communities of the plains. In his 2014 book 'People of the Margins,' Philippe Ramirez discusses how, although influenced by Brahmanical culture, Jaintia rulers still followed Pnar society's typical inheritance principles: kingship passed to the sister's son. And perhaps as an adaptation of the Pnar mode of residence in which married men do not live with their wives, most Jaintia rajas (Syiems) did not marry at all; an unthinkable practice in Brahmanical society" (page 154). The Khasi (Pnar being a subgroup of the Khasi) not only clung to their matrilineal traditions despite their contact with a more pervasive patrilineal culture; they actively sought to impose matrilineal traditions on others as well.

It is an accepted fact corroborated by the Karbi themselves that a section of the Karbi who were staying within the domain of Hima Jaintiapur left for the Ahom because they were being forced by the Khasi to adopt matrilineal customs. This narrative is found in the 1908 book 'The Mikir' by Edward Stack. Among the Karbis that stayed back was Bisokoida, from the Ronghang clan, who ruled over a domain which most probably fell under the Hima Jaintiapur until the mid-nineteenth century. He is supposed to have married the daughter of the Jaintia Syiem and had a son and two daughters. After a personal tragedy Bisokoida gave his domain to "the Ronghangs" (i.e. Sar Ronghang's clan)

and goes to settle among the Jaintias, who having lost their Syiem adopted him as their ruler. Later Bisokoida appointed Harpokang, Sar Ronghang's son, to establish a capital in Socheng and named him the first Recho (Raja/Syiem), or Lindok. This version found in 'People of the Margins', is about the foundation of Rongkhang, the eldest of the traditional polities recognised by Karbi-speaking communities. In the first two generations, the Recho did not pass succession to his son, but to his son-in-law. It was only from the third generation onward that patrilineal traditions prevailed. Matrilineal principles were thus followed for a time before patrilineal principles took over. This was very much because of the influence of the Khasis, which was also felt by the Tiwa as well. Along the Meghalaya Assam border lies the traditional polity called Ghoba, whose current royal family describes itself as Tiwa, claiming that it originated from the Tiwa-speaking villages of Umswai (a Khasi name) valley, 20 km to the South. According to the Gobha rajas' foundation myth, Khungri (princess), or Hari Kunwari, who performs the worship along with the raja's paternal uncle, was the apical ancestress of the Maloi, the Rajas' matriline. Successions, like the Khasi, followed the female line.

So, when we are talking about Article 371 or the Sixth Schedule, it is about the primacy of the customary laws which for the Khasis are the basis of their political institutions (Hima and Raid). Article 371 can help with that, but the Sixth Schedule has also been doing the same job. The question is not about which constitutional provision is better suited, but whether we are going to allow any dilution to our matrilineal traditions. Jeopardizing those traditions threatens our entire identity as a community and severs our connection to our ancestors who fought to maintain them. In that case, Article 371 or the Sixth Schedule will also lose its relevance. If there's a discussion to protect customary laws, it has to be about protecting our matrilineal traditions, not which constitutional provisions are better suited. Or is it an attempt to dilute our traditions while also obscuring the problems of governance which have plagued our ADCs? If we are always fighting, we wouldn't know who is fooling us. I hope that is not the case. So, let's talk about actual issues of governance and not fool the people for political gains.

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

Concert Economy- India is the new kid in the block- Are We Ready?

By Bahunlang Pde

India's live entertainment industry is on the brink of a boom, with the concert economy poised to become a multi-billion-dollar force. There are several negative comments on social media which truly concerns me about the collective intelligence of the ones commenting. Questions loom in my head—Are they truly in the dark like frogs stuck in a well or have hidden agendas? I will consider the former & continue with cold hard facts, though I doubt they read newspapers.

First and foremost, it is important to note that it is not the place of any online or offline critics, to dictate how the common people choose to spend their hard-earned money. If people wish to attend a concert, invest in a cultural experience, or support a local event, that decision belongs to them. It is their money, their life, and their enjoyment. Every citizen of India has the right to use their legally earned money as they wish, protected under Article 21 (right to life and liberty) and Article 300A (protection from deprivation of property). Any unlawful coercion or restriction can be legally challenged under constitutional and penal laws. No external voice should interfere with personal choices that bring joy and positively impact their community. So please, people online commenting half-witted and half-baked fake news, beware.

India's live events industry has generated Rs 1,600-2,000 crore in months, with ticket sales contributing Rs 750-950 crore. By 2025, it could be worth Rs 10,000 crore. International stars like Coldplay, Ed Sheeran, and U2 attract record crowds, while Bollywood festivals thrive—all backed by immense behind-the-scenes strenuous operations. But what most people in Shillong do not see is the enormous machinery operating behind the scenes to make just one global concert a reality. Bringing an international-level concert to India is no small feat. The planning starts at least six months in advance, involving hundreds of crew members, months of logistics coordination, and massive financial investments. Here is a reality check:

1. Infrastructure & Setup: A single concert stage for an A-list artist requires 150-200 tons of equipment, flown in by cargo planes. Sound, lighting, and video systems take weeks to assemble, with teams working round the clock.

2. Logistics & Manpower: International artists travel with a core team of 50-100 people, including technicians, security, and stylists. Local event teams add another 1,000+ workers handling permits, crowd control, and backstage coordination.

3. Permits & Red Tape: In India, hosting an event of this scale requires approvals from multiple government departments, including police, fire safety, and municipal authorities—a process that can delay projects for months.

4. Economic Impact: Beyond ticket sales, concerts drive business in hospitality, travel, and merchandise. A major international concert can generate Rs 200-500 crore in total spending

across hotels, restaurants, and tourism.

But the impact is not just financial—it transforms the entire region where the concert happens. The hospitality sector booms with thousands of fans booking hotels, dining out, and using local transport. Restaurants, cafes, and street vendors see record sales. Small businesses—local souvenir shops, merchandise sellers, and tour operators—get a massive boost. In fact, a December 2024 Bank of Baroda study done by Economists, Dipanwita Mazumdar and Jahnavi Prabhakar, shows that every Rs 1 spent on a concert ticket translates to Rs 4-5 in additional economic activity for the local economy.

Despite the clear benefits, there has been considerable pushback on the idea of hosting major concerts in places like Meghalaya. Some online comments and media reports express concerns over the environmental impact and the suitability of such events for the local culture. These voices, while vocal, miss the larger picture: concerts bring prosperity, global attention, and employment opportunities. These critics fail to acknowledge that every major event, from international sports tournaments to cultural festivals, requires extensive planning and careful consideration. Yes, there are challenges, but they should not overshadow the monumental rewards that come with global exposure and investments.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his speech at the Utkarsh Odisha, Make in Odisha Conclave, underscored the importance of building an infrastructure to support this sector. He emphasized the government's commitment to creating world-class venues and promoting large-scale events across the country. Modi's vision of turning India into a global hub for live entertainment reflects his understanding of the immense potential in this sector. With proper investment, better infrastructure, and strategic planning, India could lead the world in hosting cultural and music festivals, providing employment and economic opportunities along the way.

There are several other ambitious ventures such as Concert Tourism brought in by Indian born-Sunburn Festival and International level such as Tomorrowland and Coachella. Given the large conference spaces and good weather – another option can be Conference Tourism – tie up with corporates directly for their offsites and conferences. The concert economy is not just about music—it is a multi-dimensional boom, driving job creation, tourism, and much needed local growth with employment. If there are no tourists to a tourist destination, how will the locals earn? If we continue this positive path with sustainability, right support and infrastructure, Meghalaya could become the ultimate destination for global artists with their fans in tow. We are on the cusp of something extraordinary—let us ensure we rise to the occasion and embrace the opportunities before us instead of croaking like blind frogs with no end goal from a deep dark well of nothingness.

Letters to the Editor

On 'The Shillong Times' discussion in Khasi

Editor,
The theme 'To Ngin lathir' on the issue of whether the right to marry a person of one's choice has to be regulated is perhaps the most stimulating and thoughtful discussion from Shillong that I have ever listened to. How time flies when you are enjoying yourself! This should be the format of discussions all the time especially during elections. And yes, we need questioning not just being "niang kohnguh" (nodding in agreement). All the panelists made really good observations. So well done!

Yours etc.,
Janet Hujon,
Via email

Emergence of a brand new "Hate Politics"

Editor,
Lately, we have seen a sudden shift in the political

scenario in Meghalaya, especially in the eastern half of the state. A new brand of politics is emerging or unfolding which in my opinion is a politics inclining towards the ultra-left where ethnocentrism and neo-Marxism are the main focal points. The other day I happened to come across a video where the President of the VPP was giving a speech in one of his election campaigns. He was trying to persuade the crowd by saying that his party is for the downtrodden and the poor whereas the NPP is for wealthy and affluent. After pondering for a while I can clearly see the motive of Ardent. This is a classic case of driving a wedge between the haves and the have nots of the state. This clearly translates to a tactic used commonly by the ultra-left to further extend their influence over the people.

Secondly, being anti-establishment is another strategy of the ultra-left to oppose or challenge the existing power structure and coincidentally here the VPP is challenging the age old traditional institution i.e. The Dorbar Shnong. Thirdly, the criticism of the

media for perpetrating fake news against the VPP clearly indicates the haughtiness or egotism of its leaders and this is a major red flag that a political party is against the 'Fourth Pillar' of Democracy. Lastly, the VPP from time to time have been adopting strong arm methods which advocate protests, sit in rallies in order to achieve its political goals. As a citizen, I am deeply concerned about this new political development in our state. Every individual has the right to ascribe to any political ideology they choose to. I'm a Right winger myself, but I will never affiliate with any groups or parties that undermine the democratic value of our state.

Yours etc.,
W. Tariang,
Via email

Wanted alternative venues for rock concerts

Editor,
The JN Stadium is very much in the news these past few days because of the high

profile ISL matches and a musical extravaganza. The stadium was built by the Government as a response to the pressing demand by the football lovers and teams as there was no stadium in Shillong. To improve the stadium AstroTurf was laid to enable national and international standard football to be played. Of late, however the JN Stadium is being used for musical extravaganza as a result of which the football turf is damaged although the Government is trying its best with the latest technology to keep it play-worthy.

The craze for the musical extravaganza is growing and music lovers are flocking here as Shillong is now called the 'Rock Capital' of India. In such a scenario Shillong needs at least 2-3 more stadia to hold different functions like the musical extravaganza by the International artists etc. Government says that elsewhere in the country such concerts are held in the stadium. That is because those states have a number of stadiums while we have only one in Shillong.

I urge the Government to build at least 2-3 more stadia in Shillong and the suburbs

for other purposes like cricket, football and concerts which will not damage the only existing stadium i.e., JN Stadium which was built for the purpose of football activities of repute.

Yours etc.,
SL Singhania,
Via email

Living with honesty and humour

Editor,
After having a cup of tea at a roadside tea shop, I gave the shop owner a ten rupee note. The shop owner was a middle-aged woman fighting hard for survival from heart disease and financial hardship. Since the tea cost five rupees she was to return the change. After searching for a coin she got 2 two-rupee coins and told me to wait a minute so that she could bring one rupee from a nearby shop. I told her to forget about it. But she was determined to return the right change.

I could not tell her that it was a matter of a mere

one rupee because honesty is priceless. It does not depend on the value whether it is one rupee or rupees one lakh. So, I said that I would give her one rupee less next time when I have tea at her shop. My intention was to escape from her eatery without hurting her feelings and sentiments.

But her reply reflected not only her sense of humour but also her spiritual inclination that made her remain honest amid poverty life crises. She said with a smile, "I am afraid lest you search for me above!"

Spiritual inclination (not religious dogma) and a sense of humour provide a toiling person with oxygen to survive amid obstacles and challenges.

Every day a middle-aged fish hawker comes riding on a cycle in front of our building. He too has good sense of humour. Our next door neighbour buys fish from him every second day. After buying a fish, my neighbour asked him to piece the fish without discarding the fish fat from the belly.

The hawker said, "I will give you everything I get

inside its belly. You will get even a diamond ring if it is there!" His joke reminds me of the story line of Kalidasa's Abhijnanasakuntalam.

I felt like seeing a street drama of a modern version of that story where the hawker was like the fisherman who was to find a ring in the belly of the fish. The ring that Dusyanta had given to Sakuntala. My next door neighbour was like the modern Dusyanta. The ring would remind him about his marriage with her.

Some years ago, a political leader taught broom sellers a business trick. He suggested that they should exchange old brooms of customers with new ones by giving them some discount on the price of new brooms. Then they should use materials like piping, wire, and nylon from old brooms to prepare new ones.

Every morning a broom hawker passes through the lane in front of our house with his melodious chants, "phool jharoo." One day I bought a broom from him and requested him to take my old one for free. To my surprise he declined. I sug-

gested that the materials of the old broom could be used for making a new one. But he said, "Why should I use old materials? In that case, new brooms will not last long."

Many companies use sub-standard material so that their products don't last long in order to boost sales. We may think the broom seller is poor because he does not know business tricks. But human greed and dishonesty have been pushing the world into an environmental disaster. Hence honesty is still the best policy in the long run.

While the tea seller shows a sense of humour and honesty, the fish hawker makes his mark with the former and the broom hawker with the latter. The greed of the powerful makes the world ecologically fragile and grumpy. The world will be a happy place if they learn from virtuous people.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

"It takes half your life before you discover life is a do-it-yourself project."

— Napoleon Hill

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 181 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2025

A humourless society

AN oft-quoted adage from Roman philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus is, "One man's meat is another man's poison." Likes and dislikes change with each individual. A humorous comment for some could be viewed by some others as an insult. Social cohesion requires that all in the public sphere are mindful of their words and deeds. But, freedom of speech is important too. This thought arises in the context of the summons being issued by the police against hugely popular YouTuber and podcaster Ranveer Alahabadi and his team over their roast show, India's Got Latent.

In fact, hell has been let loose over a "vulgar" comment about parental sex. Sex, the very essence of life, is itself taboo for the hypocrites here; and an open discussion referencing parental sex is anathema. In the forefront of the aggressive campaign against Alahabadi, in this context, are three predictable segments of the society—politicians, the media and social activists. They are baying for his blood. They are not satisfied with his open apology. It's only natural that a BJP government -- of Assam -- used its police to issue the first summons against the performer. Consider the fact that this 31-year-old has a cult status among the youths not just in India but abroad too. He has nearly five million followers on Instagram and over a crore of them among YouTube subscribers. He has been regaling his audience since the time of Covid-19 through his witticisms and more. What Maharashtra's chief minister Devendra Fadnis has stressed -- that one man's freedom cannot be stretched to encroach upon another man's freedom -- is noted. Yet, attempts at curtailing the freedom of a performer or jester on the basis of one's concepts about morality carries with it the danger of curbing free speech. It scares all performers. Creativity and Freedom are inseparable. We can guide a person to make a product. Creating something new requires the inbuilt talents of a genius. All in the creative, artistic, entertainment field cherish their freedom. Talented heroes need no spoon-feeding. They act on their own and put life into characters. India's problem today is it is devoid of a sense of humour. Even creativity is in short supply. Education is fashioned in ways that produce stereotypes. The result is, we do not even have good doctors in most hospitals.

Our politicians are largely an incompetent, ill-informed, ageing lot; deadwood. They fail to fathom the social changes or mind the aspirations of the new generation. They are hypocrites. They speak in one manner and act in the opposite. They speak up for the poor and sup with the rich. They quote scriptures and act like devils. Most social activists are publicity seekers. The media no more mirrors life in its totality; it mirrors the faces of politicians and other vested interests. If the political character changes, societies too will change; and vice versa. Right now we are caught in a rut.

The education factory: Growing mediocrity

By Dr. Ranee Kaur Banerjee

Let us take an informal look at the formal education system as it is currently practiced in much of the mushrooming spaces we call urban India.

Imagine a male child is born today. I refer to this child as him/he based purely on biological sex. I assume he cannot yet know or articulate whether or not he is cis-gender.

When he is merely 1.5, his parents shall take the first frenzied steps to give their child the best education they can afford. They will try to enrol him into a reputable Montessori or Kindergarten that will become his stepping-stone to a "big" school. They will bravely bear the heartache of leaving him at the gate of his Montessori bawling and throwing a tantrum and ignore his pitiful cries of separation because here, their child will be taught the skills required to enter the regular school system, preferably in one of the three schools in the city that are considered aspirational.

Still, they will not be assured that they are doing enough to give their child a real chance. So they will send him to a computer class, and perhaps they will also enrol him in an art class where he will learn to colour within the lines and always, but always, in one direction.

When he is 2.6, it will be time to seek his admission to a coveted mainstream school. His parents shall now move heaven and earth and unearth every possible connection to get their child into a good school. Just to be sure, they shall also send him to a coaching class. At this coaching class, an "auntie" will teach this two-year-old to talk like a five-year-old with the vocabulary of a ten-year-old.

This is also the time when our little adult-in-the-making may have to learn one of life's very tough, very adult lessons—rejection. Despite the fact that his parents have done everything right and on time, his name may not appear on the interview list. This, of course, is the list of children privileged enough to spend an entire day standing and waiting in the heat, all dressed up just so they can be paraded and can perform for some more adults who have power over their destinies.

Our almost-three-year-old man-in-the-making has every chance of being mysteriously rejected by the system.

His parents will persevere, however, and finally, at age three, our child will get to wear a smart uniform and go to a big school. The parents will now be able to heave a sigh of relief as big as the school and relax for the next ten years. Or so they think.

School will be Darwinian—only the toughest, the fittest, the most extrovert, the naughtiest, the most talkative, the most something—will matter. Our shy, quiet, obedient, unobtrusive, average child will be forgotten and

left to fend for himself. At the end of the year, he will be lucky if his teacher can remember his name, let alone be aware of and nurture his potential!

It is not the teacher's fault. It's a jungle out there: the better and more desirable the school, the bigger and more vicious the jungle is. The teacher-student ratio in these schools is so beyond impossible that the teacher would have to be a superior being if she could remember all the names and faces in her class.

If our child is never a problem that needs to be solved, if he does his homework on time, doesn't display any outstanding talent, doesn't raise his hand, or call attention to himself, he is likely to fade into the background.

His mother will pick him up from school sometimes, and there she will meet other mothers. Suddenly, our almost-man, who is now all of six years old, will constantly be ragged by his mother. "Rahul got nine on his grade; how come you only got an eight?" "Amit was chosen for the art contest. Why don't you ever get chosen for anything?" "Have you seen Vedant's handwriting? Why can't you be neater?"

Our six-year-old almost-man will now learn another adult lesson on becoming—even his mother would like him to be Rahul or Amit or Vedant. He is not good enough even for her. Not as he is now.

By the time he is eight, our little man will already be creating employment opportunities for others. The city's orthopedics and physiotherapists will make their careers and write research papers on his shoulders that have manfully—and oh, so painfully—sagged under the weight of his school bag.

By the time he is ten, he will have no time to play. Competition will be fierce, and his records will show him to be average. His parents will have ambitions for him, and average will not be enough. Tuitions will be added to his daily roster of activities that will include swimming or karate or cricket, computers, elocution or public speaking and personality development and maybe even learning a musical instrument.

By the time he is ten, our child would have learnt his final adult lesson: life is hard work. He will finally be a man. He will know what burnt out means before he has any business to.

He will now learn to take class tests, block tests, half-yearly and annual tests that will prepare him to take board exams and joint-entrance exams. His every waking moment will be spent in school or at coaching classes worrying about the next examination, and the next, and the next. He shall spend his holidays working at internships for work experience

or attending diploma classes that add some mystical value to his skills. And so it will go until he joins the grind of the full-time workforce.

I define childhood as the condition of "becoming adult."

Within a short span of ten to eleven years, a body grows from the size of a full-stop to adult dimensions. In just a few short years, an incognate spirit is socialized, moralized, and made part of an existing structure—of tribe, nation, race, language, gender, and religion. At a fast, almost breakneck speed, a child acquires language, values, morality, personality, socialization, culturalization, schooling, behavioral rights, and wrongs.

Childhood is, thus, a period of terrible, accelerated growth, a state of constant and turbulent flux in which, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, a being is always and forever caught in the process of becoming and desiring to become something other than he is.

The system that we trust will guide and nurture our country's children is also India's greatest growth sector, the Education Industry. Parents, urban and rural, above and below the controversial poverty line, are spending more than they can afford to educate their children. They have been made to believe that education will help their child stand out and be counted.

In fact, this education system is the root creator of generations of disciplined mediocrity: what I call iccube children.

Michel Foucault described discipline as the "art of making bodies more obedient even as they become more efficient." It is the nature of those in power to seek submission to the rules they establish. It is equally the nature of the powerless to try to subvert the power of the authorities. When rules are flouted, as they always are, authority must punish transgressions or lose control. Thus, the system of discipline and punishment is instituted.

Foucault sees this system of discipline and punishment as most prevalent in prisons, hospitals, and, yes, schools. (Foucault, Michel (1975). Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, New York: Random House. French original published as Surveiller et punir, Paris: Gallimard, 1975)

Unfortunately, this phenomenon is nowhere clearer than here, in our schools.

Our school system makes the strong stronger and the weak weaker. It is a system that fosters competition and stifles creativity. It is a system based on theoretical learning that does not consider or explain applications. It is a system that reinforces all the stereotypes and socioeconomic differences that exist in our society. It is a system that

changes history in its books to promote the ends of its political masters. It is a system that credits the one who can learn by rote and disregards the one who does not know all the answers but has learnt how to find them. It is a system that still has a colonial hangover and has no idea how to deal with the changing zeitgeist of our strange cultural heritage.

Come to think of it, there is no system, no congruity, no logical alignment in the way we educate our nation's children. There are government schools that experiment with teaching or not teaching certain languages and subjects depending on the whims of politics. There are parochial schools that teach and indoctrinate what they want. There are state-language or "vernacular medium schools" for which standards are different. And then there are all kinds of "English medium" schools— from those that want to be Indian in their values (whatever that means) to the missionary schools that are so coveted by all parents.

Each school must be affiliated to a board—the state-controlled boards, the ISC or the CBSE, and now even the O and A levels or the GCSE or the International Baccalaureate—that administer school leaving tests and decide whether the schools have imparted enough education to their students and pronounce on the quality of education received. The problem is, a student is certified proficient or deficient depending on the standard of the board his school serves. The boards do not themselves agree on standards, syllabi, or even testing and certifying methods.

Our education system is a structure designed to manufacture adults faster, more efficiently, more scientifically and mechanically than ever before. It exists to create uniformed and uniform armies of young people who have memorized facts that are already known. These armies will become the custodians who protect the status quo—that which already exists. New worlds are not created out of rigid, old structures—they need the amniotic fluid of indiscipline to grow and become viable. Visionary reflection requires the leisure to dream new worlds. Creative ideas need the freedom and pure pleasure of playing games.

Prophets of the future breed not in discipline but in undisciplined eccentricities. I wish our little imaginary child had some time every day to be unfettered because indiscipline in the form of unstructured, unsupervised play is the child's way of exploring himself, learning himself, and finally, of asserting his independence and his readiness to take control over his life. But where do our children find the indulgence of being kids? They are too busy becoming adult.

(Dr Ranee Kaur Banerjee holds a PhD in Comparative Literature University of Georgia)

Why Meghalaya Budget needs an urgent Urban Mission

By Avner Pariat

Meghalaya is experiencing rapid urbanization. Cities like Shillong, Tura, and Jowai are expanding quickly, but our urban infrastructure is struggling to keep up. Without a well-planned Urban Mission, the state risks facing severe challenges in Housing, Transportation, Waste Management, and overall quality of life. These, I would argue, are probably the most pressing political pressures that this (and any) government will have to face.

Let us begin with the vital issue of Housing. Our rising population density has increased the demand for affordable housing, but that demand has not been met. Most areas in the capital city lack proper planning, resulting in overcrowded settlements with inadequate sanitation and infrastructure. Trash is strewn about, waiting for the rain to wash it away and clog some pipeline downstream. Drains from household compounds open up directly into the streets, encouraging vermin and feral animals to thrive. It is no exaggeration to say that one can feel the palpable tension everywhere as one moves from slum to slum, tenement to tenement.

People are not happy. The grim reality is that to own land at these meagre salaries (Rs 10,000-20,000 per month) is a distant dream for most people under 40. On average, 4000 square feet of non-commercial land in a place like Langkyrding will set you back by about Rs 80 lakhs. That is just the land; I am not talking about the construction costs for a house itself. Without housing loans, which most of us will not get as we have no "fixed salary," that would mean we are left to fend for ourselves. So, say a monthly income of Rs 20,000 gets my total yearly income up to Rs 2,40,000 per year. That would mean I can be the proud owner of my own small 4000-square-foot plot of land after 33 to 34 years. Oh, yay! In that 33-34-year period, of course, my entire salary must go towards paying for this land. I cannot eat, have a family, nor do anything else with my income except paying for those 4000 square feet of land. Is that not tragedy and comedy at the same time?

So, we are forced to rent instead. Have you seen the condition of the places they put up for rent these days? You can actually go online right now on Meta (IG or FB) and look at the places for yourselves. Let me summarize them for you: cramped, congested, safety hazards with no amenities, and very little natural light or ventilation. That is what you will get these days in various neighbourhoods around town. For the average person earning between Rs 10,000 – Rs 20,000 per month, they will have to move further away from the central parts and end up in places like Demthring, Nongrah, Mawlai, etc. Sure, rents here will be cheaper, say between Rs 5,000 to Rs 7,000 per month, but they will have to make peace with the fact that a large percentage of

their earnings will be spent on transportation as the cheaper rental accommodations are further away from the commercial centres where they work. So, after all this, we will have a youth population that will be exhausted at the end of the day, poorer at the end of the month, and angry, all the time. Society will forever be in flux and in turmoil, and governance will always be unstable just because we did not want to provide cheap or free housing to the people.

So how do we fix this? It is quite simple, actually. If we are taking loans from so many places, it should not be a problem to take a billion-dollar loan from somewhere and just, you know, BUILD MORE HOUSES! The government can come in as the guarantor and ensure that people pay EMIs on the units for, say, 30 years. Who knows—with proper planning, the government could actually make some money from the entire enterprise. After that 30-year period, the units would belong permanently to the people and their families. We can build colonies, community flats from that billion-dollar loan, whatever it be. We need more of these types of basic interventions now, and not major events and concerts, that actually drain the Exchequer and do not add to our revenue.

The government should explore innovative solutions such as cooperative housing societies where individuals can pool resources to build cost-effective homes. Underpinning the entire project should be an emphasis and a foregrounding of the welfare of the local Labour force and not just the contractors. I have argued before for worker-led construction companies to take up infrastructure projects across Meghalaya. This massive project/undertaking could be the biggest improvement in their lives. Some might bring in the PMAY (Urban) Mission here for discussion but that has been a dead duck from the start because of the various fallacies in its design and I do not know any notable exceptions to this. For further reading one can refer to India's Enduring Urban Housing Shortage: The Case for Upgrading Informal Settlements by Manpreet Barta, for a general overview of the scheme.

It is Science; it is Data. Housing has been studied closely and in great detail for decades from all over the world. Researchers have found, time and time again, that when people are secured (in terms of house ownership), they live better, happier lives and, crucially, they are better workers too, which leads to better productivity, which leads to better revenues for the state itself. So, in the long run, the provision of Housing is a win-win for everyone. Urban development should not be an afterthought; it should be the centrepiece of Meghalaya's economic planning. The budget must reflect this urgent need before our cities collapse under the weight of neglect and mismanagement.

Letters to the Editor

Land banks a threat to indigenous communities

Editor,
Public concerns about the potential misuse of land banks by politicians and business interests are valid, especially in regions where land is a sensitive issue. The fear that land banks could be used as a tool for land grabbing under the guise of development is something that many communities share. If land banks are introduced without strict regulations and transparency, there is a real risk that:

1. Local landowners would lose their rights – Innocent landowners might be pressured to lease out their land without fully understanding the long-term consequences.

2. Bypassing legal safeguards – If land is leased to outsiders, it could bypass local protections like the 6th Schedule, which safeguards indigenous rights.

3. Political Corruption – Politicians and their associates could manipulate the

system to benefit themselves or their allies rather than the public.

4. Environmental and cultural impact – Large-scale projects might disrupt the local environment and cultural heritage, leading to loss of traditional ways of life.

5. Unequal economic benefits – The benefits of development may not reach local communities, with profits instead flowing to political and business elites.

If such a policy is being pushed forward, it would require strong opposition from indigenous communities, legal challenges, and public awareness campaigns.

Yours etc.,
D Challam,
Via email

Mawiong still deprived of basic water supply

Editor,
The people of Mawiong are still living in an age where access to water remains a struggle? The Jal Jeevan Mission, launched by the Prime Minister of India in 2019,

aims to provide tap water connections and clean drinking water to every rural household. While official reports claim that around 81% of rural households in Meghalaya have been covered, the situation in Mawiong tells a different story.

Many areas in Mawiong still lack access to water connections. The responsibility of the Public Health Engineering Department to ensure timely implementation has not been fulfilled. While challenges exist, delays should not be an excuse. The residents of Mawiong, many of whom have lived here for 10 to 15 years, continue to depend on rainwater harvesting or carry water from distant sources. Previously, drilling for water was permitted, but even that option is no longer available.

It is unacceptable that in this modern era, the people of Mawiong remain deprived of such a basic necessity. I urge the authorities to accelerate the work and fulfil their commitment to provide clean water to every household in Mawiong without further delay.

Yours etc.,
B. Laitphlang,
Via email

Growth of the creative economy

Editor,
I read with interest the special article "Concert Economy – India is the new kid in the block-Are we ready?" (ST February 11, 2025) by Bahunlang Pde. Pde has brought to fore and quoted a study done by the Bank of Baroda on how a Rupee on a concert ticket translates to four or five rupees in additional economic activity. This in economics is referred to as a multiplier effect. This occurs when an initial amount of spending leads to an increase in economic activity greater than the initial expenditure which many online and offline critics do not know due to lack of knowledge on economics. In this context, money spent on concert tickets generates additional spending in related sectors, such as hospitality, food, transportation and merchandise.

This ripple effect boosts the local economy and creates a larger economic impact than the original spending. Hence, the concert economy's ability

to generate additional economic activity demonstrates the multiplier effect at work. As physical and digital music sales decline, artist and industry professionals are increasingly relying on live events to generate income. This trend contributes to economic growth through tickets sales, local market development and increased spending on accommodation, food and transportation. India is emerging as a key player.

High-profile concerts by international artists like Coldplay and Taylor Swift have demonstrated the potential for substantial revenue generation and economic impact. The prospects for the concert economy in India are quite promising! With a young, music loving audience and increasing disposable incomes, the demand for live concerts is on the rise. The sector is projected to grow significantly, with the live events industry valued at Rs 88 billion in 2023 and expected to reach Rs 143 billion by 2026, growing at an impressive 17.6 percent annually.

According to PWC, the live music market is expected to reach \$245.5 million by 2028. In 2024, India hosted

30,687 live events across 391 cities marking an 18 percent increase in live entertainment. This growth is not limited to metropolitan areas; tier-2 cities like Kanpur, Shillong and Gandhinagar have seen a staggering 682% rise in live events. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has highlighted the immense potential of India's concert economy, noting that high-profile concerts by international artists like Coldplay and Taylor Swift have demonstrated the economic benefits of live events.

These concerts not only boost tourism but also create numerous jobs in sectors such as hospitality, transportation, food and beverages, and event management. The government and private sector are focusing on developing the necessary infrastructure and skills to attract more global artists and elevate India's live entertainment scene. This includes improving event management, artist grooming, security and other arrangements.

The prospects for the concert economy in Meghalaya are quite promising. The state has been a trendsetter in organizing live music events, dating back to the early 2000s. This early adoption has po-

sitioned Meghalaya as a key player in the concert economy, attracting both local and international artists. For instance, the upcoming Ed Sheeran concert in Shillong on February 12, 2025, is expected to draw over 27,000 attendees, with a significant portion coming from outside the state. This event highlights the growing appeal of Meghalaya as a destination for high-profile concerts. The state government, along with private sector partners, is focused on developing the necessary infrastructure and skills to host more such events. This includes ensuring smooth logistics, traffic management, and overall seamless execution of concerts.

Another important aspect that the author has pinpointed is Conference Tourism which refers to travel undertaken by individuals or groups to attend conferences, conventions or meetings. This type of tourism involves participants traveling to a specific location to engage in professional, academic or industry related events. Conference tourism can significantly impact local economies by boosting hotel occupancy, restaurant patronage and other related services.

Given Meghalaya's hu-

mid subtropical climate with heavy rainfall, especially during the monsoon season, conference tourism does face some challenges. However, the state's picturesque landscapes, rich cultural heritage and unique festivals make it an attractive destination for conferences and events. To mitigate climatic challenges, organizers often plan events during the drier months, typically from October to March. Additionally, the state government and private sector are working on improving infrastructure, such as better venues and accommodations, to support conference tourism. Overall, while the climate poses some challenges, Meghalaya's natural beauty and cultural richness provide a strong foundation for developing conference tourism with proper planning and infrastructure.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

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

"Strive for continuous improvement,
instead of perfection."

— Kim Collins

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No.182 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2025

The Coal Conundrum

THAT a key partner of the MDA Government – the BJP is putting together what can be called a dossier documenting the modus operandi of the illegal coal trade is something that could needle the NPP which is leading the Government. Within the MDA there is a sense of having achieved an important goal with the Centre and Supreme Court giving a go-ahead signal to scientific coal mining in Meghalaya. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) had banned rat hole mining in April 2014 on account of the risk posed to miners, many of whom die inside the mines due to sudden flooding. However, despite the NGT ban, mining carried on and as late as 2018 December there was a mining accident in Ksan, East Jaintia Hills where about 15 people had died inside the coal mine due to flooding. This became national and international news and the dead bodies were never retrieved barring the remnants of two bodies. And truth be told illegal coal mining has continued, although a few mine owners began to look at alternative businesses.

It is a fact that the coal seams in Meghalaya are shallow and open cast mining would not be feasible. Scientific mining in shallow seams would require special machinery which would work out to be more expensive than using humans to enter the coal shafts. Besides, there could also be a lot of waste. Over and above that the mines will have to be auctioned out to bidders who have the wherewithal to go in for scientific mining techniques. The question before the Government today is whether these formalities are in place. Mining has environmental consequences. Since the late 1980's, the State Planning Board of Meghalaya had raised concerns about the abandoned mines and whether the Government would reclaim the mines which have become death traps. In fact the mine flooding occurs when a flooded abandoned mine is accidentally dug into while exploring for coal and the water comes flooding in.

The MDA Government feels that coal mining will rake in revenues that could be invested in other developmental purposes. This is fine as long as the environmental costs are figured in. The entire North East is a biodiversity hotspot and mining has huge environmental consequences. Coal mining in particular results in acid mine drainage which turns rivers and springs acidic and makes them unfit for human consumption. Unless an eco-restoration plan along the lines of the Supreme Court directive to Lafarge Umiang Mining Private Ltd, is in place, mining should not resume. There has to be robust state action and responsibility in this matter. The limestone mines in the Shella areas that are managed by private individuals are in a horrific state. The miners are not accountable for the environmental consequences. Can this sort of mining be allowed? It is unsustainable and has long term impacts which will affect generations to come. The Government has to give some serious thought to this issue. Coal mining may be a livelihood for some but it cannot be allowed to be a curse for many. Good governance means sparing a thought for the environment and the future.

Debate over Article 371 for Meghalaya: Lessons from Nagaland and Mizoram

By Erwin K Syiem Sutnga

As the Khasi and Jaintia Hills gear up for elections to the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC), political debates have intensified. A recurring refrain in these discussions is the call for special constitutional provisions for Meghalaya under Article 371. Yet, before embarking on this potentially disruptive path, it is instructive to examine the experiences of Nagaland under Article 371A and Mizoram under Article 371G—experiences that have not only stirred political and administrative challenges but have also generated a rich tapestry of judicial interpretations in both the High Courts and the Supreme Court.

Nagaland and Article 371A: Judicial Lessons from a Struggle for Autonomy.

Resource Management Conflicts and Judicial Oversight

At the heart of Article 371A, particularly Clause IV, is the promise of state control over land and natural resources. Intended as a shield for the Naga people's interests, its implementation has faced significant hurdles. In a series of disputes, the Nagaland issue reached the apex Court of the judiciary. For instance, in the landmark *State of Nagaland v. Union of India* (2010) case—often referred to as the "Oil Exploration Dispute"—the Supreme Court addressed Nagaland's attempt to assert exclusive authority over oil and gas exploration. The resolution passed by the Nagaland Legislative Assembly, invoking Clause IV to bypass central regulations such as the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, was met with stern opposition from the central government. The Court ruled that matters listed under Entry 53 of the Union List, which covers mineral resources, remain under the purview of Parliament. This decision not only stalled oil exploration projects but also underscored a fundamental judicial observation: while Article 371A is designed to confer autonomy, its provisions are not immune to overarching Union legislation.

Symbolic Autonomy Versus Legislative Inadequacy:

Legal commentators, including Advisor to the Chief Minister of Nagaland, Mr. Imkong L. Imchen, have argued that the autonomy envisioned in Clause IV remains largely symbolic. Various High Court opinions have noted that the Nagaland Legislative Assembly lacks the legislative power to transform this symbolic autonomy into effective governance. A *Morning Express* opinion poll further highlighted these concerns, with around 70% of Nagaland respondents expressing the view that Article 371A, particularly Clause IV, has failed to safeguard their interests in resource ownership and management. This widespread public skepticism reinforces the judicial caution that mere constitutional guarantees, without enforceable mechanisms, may not suffice to protect resource rights or ensure effective state governance.

Mizoram and Article 371G:

When Traditional Governance clashes with Modern Constitutional Mandates: Navigating the Complex Terrain of Resource Control and Administrative Autonomy

Mizoram's special status under Article 371G was meant to safeguard its unique cultural and administrative practices. Yet, the Mizoram experience reveals a similar pattern of challenges. In the notable *Mizoram Tribal Council v. State of Mizoram* (2018) ruling, the Mizoram High Court examined the friction between traditional governance and the imposition of modern administrative frameworks—most prominently in the context of municipal elections. The decision illuminated the conflict between constitutional mandates for urban governance and the

state's cherished traditional institutions, which have long managed local affairs. The judiciary stressed that while democratic norms must be upheld, they should not erode indigenous governance structures.

Economic Disruptions and Administrative Delays

Judicial findings in subsequent Supreme Court decisions have reiterated that despite Article 371G's assurances, Mizoram's control over its natural resources remains circumscribed by Union laws—especially those under Entry 53. The central government's retained authority has hampered independent economic growth and infrastructure development. Investors have been deterred by legal ambiguities surrounding resource management policies, and financial dependence on central grants—exacerbated by delayed projects due to regulatory conflicts—has reinforced the view that Mizoram's special status is more symbolic than substantive.

Why Introducing Article 371 in Meghalaya Could Create More Problems Than It Solves.

Overlapping Jurisdictions and Administrative Inefficiencies:

Meghalaya already benefits from the autonomy accorded under the Sixth Schedule, which has empowered Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) the KHADC, GHADC, and JHADC to legislate on tribal identity, land, and culture. Injecting Article 371 into this framework could lead to overlapping jurisdictions and administrative friction. Lessons from Nagaland's resource disputes—where vague provisions led to protracted conflicts between state and Union laws—warn against such legislative redundancy.

Marginalization of Traditional Institutions and Political Manipulation.

Judicial observations in Nagaland and Mizoram have repeatedly pointed to the risk of centralizing power in a manner that marginalizes local governance. In Meghalaya, traditional tribal institutions—such as the Syiems, Nokmas, Dolois, and the Headman or Rangbah Shnong and village Dorbar system—are not only cultural cornerstones but also essential to community cohesion. Historical judicial skepticism suggests that any move to centralize authority, similar to the experiences under Articles 371A and 371G, could open the door to political manipulation and corruption, undermining the very fabric of tribal self-rule.

Inter-Tribal Tensions and Resource Ownership Ambiguities

Meghalaya's complex mosaic of tribal communities, comprising Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos, and other smaller tribes necessitates a governance framework that respects their unique identities. The ambiguities seen in Nagaland's Clause IV—where unclear resource ownership led to economic stagnation and social unrest—should serve as a stark warning. Introducing a similar framework in Meghalaya could spur inter-tribal competition for resources, sowing the seeds of political and social discord.

A Case for Strengthening the Sixth Schedule: Shortcomings of the Sixth Schedule

While the Sixth Schedule was designed to protect the autonomy of tribal areas, it is not without its challenges. Some notable shortcomings include:

Ambiguous Demarcation of Powers: The division of authority between ADCs and state governments can be unclear, leading to jurisdictional conflicts and administrative delays.

Limited Financial Autonomy: ADCs often depend heavily on state and central grants due to inadequate revenue-generating provisions, hindering their ability to fund local development independently.

Insufficient Mechanisms for Modern Governance: Although the Schedule preserves traditional systems, it sometimes falls short in integrating modern administrative practices. This can result in a governance model that struggles to meet contemporary socio-economic demands, compounded by allegations of misuse of financial resources and corruption that call for transparent oversight.

Vulnerability to Central and State Oversight: The lack of robust safeguards can make ADCs susceptible to interventions by state or Union authorities, potentially diluting their autonomy and the protection of indigenous rights.

Enhancing the Sixth Schedule: A Tailored Approach for Meghalaya

Rather than embracing Article 371, a more tailored approach for Meghalaya would be to fortify the Sixth Schedule by incorporating dedicated, state-specific provisions within a State Chapter. Judicial discourse across various cases has underscored that clear legislative and administrative frameworks are crucial for harmonizing modern governance with traditional systems. Enhancements could include:

Clarifying Power Boundaries: Clearly demarcate the legislative and executive powers of ADCs vis-à-vis the state government to prevent overlapping authorities and administrative gridlock. This has become a clear interpretation of the Supreme Court in *Regional Provident Fund Commissioner versus The Shillong City Bus Syndicate* where the law making powers of the Autonomous District Councils under Para 3 are declared sacrosanct.

Expanding Financial Autonomy and Checks & Balances: Introduce robust fiscal mechanisms that empower ADCs to generate and manage their own revenues through direct funding—leveraging social, economic, human, and natural resources—to reduce dependence on state grants.

Integrating Modern Governance Practices: Update administrative structures to incorporate contemporary practices while respecting traditional customs, ensuring efficient service delivery and economic development.

Strengthening Institutional Safeguards: Embed stronger protections against undue external interference to preserve the autonomy and integrity of indigenous grassroots governance structures.

Additionally, a State Chapter in the Sixth Schedule could address:

Constitutional Recognition of the Matrilineal System: Codify the matrilineal inheritance tradition to safeguard rights in property and governance.

Codification of Community Land Rights: Legally enshrine community ownership to protect against exploitation by external forces.

Empowerment of Traditional Institutions: Provide financial and administrative support to bodies like the Syiems, Nokmas, and Dolois Rangbah Shnongs (including Waheh Chnong, Sor-dar Shnong, and Myntri Shnong) and village Dorbar Shnong.

Harmonized Development Strategies: Establish cooperative frameworks between ADCs and the state government to ensure that development projects are sensitive to tribal autonomy and development needs.

Revising Governing Provisions: Amend Para 12A(b) to restore powers from the President of India to the Governor, requiring the Governor's consultation with local institutions before implementing central laws. This should also include the removal of Para 12A(a) in light of the Supreme Court's judgment in *Regional Provident Fund Commissioner v. Shillong City Bus Syndicate*, which affirmed the

sacrosanctity of the law-making powers of the Autonomous District Councils under Para 3 of the Sixth Schedule.

Assessing the Tribal Interest: A Call for a Value-Added Study on Implementing Article 371 in Meghalaya.

Overview

There is an urgent need to evaluate whether extending Article 371's provisions to areas such as Police Bazar, Jail Road, Oakland, European Ward, and all government lands—historically Khasi tribal territories—serves the best interests of the tribal community in Meghalaya. A focused value-added (VA) study can help guide policymakers in this complex matter.

Key Considerations: Historical and Cultural Significance:

These urban and government lands have deep cultural roots as ancestral Khasi territories. Recognizing their tribal heritage through Article 371 could safeguard traditional customs and rights despite urbanization.

Enhanced Local Autonomy:

Granting Article 371 protections to these areas could empower local decision-making, ensuring that development policies reflect the Khasi-Jaintia community's unique needs and preserve their traditional governance structures.

Resource Management:

A comprehensive study could determine how best to align modern land use policies with traditional claims, thereby reducing conflicts and ensuring equitable resource management.

Study Objectives

A focused value-added study should:

Document Historical Land Use: Analyze the transformation of these lands from tribal territories to urbanized areas, establishing a clear historical context.

Examine Legal Frameworks: Evaluate how current laws interact with tribal rights and recommend necessary amendments.

Analyze Socio-Economic Impacts: Assess both the cultural and economic implications of implementing Article 371 in these areas.

Gather stakeholder inputs: Involve Khasi-Jaintia community leaders, urban residents, and government officials to capture diverse perspectives.

Key takeaways

A concise, value-added study is essential to decide if extending Article 371 to non-tribal areas in Meghalaya truly serves tribal interests. Such a study would provide critical insights to harmonize traditional rights with modern urban development, ensuring that any policy shift respects the heritage and future prosperity of the Khasi community.

The future roadmap:

The fervent demand for Article 371 in Meghalaya from some quarters springs from genuine concerns about preserving tribal identity and resources albeit a demand not well reasoned or researched. Judicial experiences and rulings from Nagaland and Mizoram—such as *State of Nagaland v. Union of India* (2010) and *Mizoram Tribal Council v. State of Mizoram* (2018)—make it clear that vague or overlapping constitutional provisions often lead to administrative inefficiencies, legal ambiguities, and deep-seated socio-political divisions. The *Morning Express* opinion poll, with approximately 70% of Naga respondents in Nagaland expressing dissatisfaction with the current framework under Article 371A, further underscores these concerns. Instead of adopting Article 371, a strengthened Sixth Schedule, customized to Meghalaya's unique cultural and administrative landscape in a separate State Chapter promises a more effective and harmonious way forward. Ensuring clarity and operational efficacy in governance is paramount—a lesson Meghalaya would do well to heed as it charts its own future.

Can we ignore the development initiatives of the present Government?

By Pynshaibha Latam

The state of Meghalaya, known for its picturesque landscapes, rich culture, and unique traditions, has been experiencing significant transformation under the leadership of the present government. Over the past few years, several key initiatives and policies have been implemented to uplift the people of Meghalaya, providing them with improved infrastructure, economic opportunities, and better living standards. This article highlights the many ways in which the people of Meghalaya have benefited from the current government's efforts.

One of the major areas of focus for the current government has been improving infrastructure across the state. Road connectivity, in particular, has been a priority, with several highways and rural roads being developed or upgraded to better serve the communities, especially in remote areas. Projects like the construction of bridges, tunnels, and roads have significantly improved access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities.

The government has also launched various social welfare schemes aimed at improving the quality of life for vulnerable sections of society, especially women, children, and the elderly. Initiatives such as the distribution of free or subsidized food grains, financial aid for low-income families, and support for the elderly have made a significant difference in the lives of many residents.

"The government's emphasis on promoting eco-tourism has also helped in preserving the state's natural heritage while providing a sustainable source of income to local communities. Many indigenous groups and local entrepreneurs have benefited from the influx of tourists, offering services like homestays, guided tours, and handicraft sales. Agriculture plays a vital role in Meghalaya's economy, and the present government has made significant strides in improving the livelihoods of farmers."

Special attention has been paid to the empowerment of women, with programs focusing on women's health, education, and entrepreneurship. The government has introduced financial support for women's self-help groups, encouraging women to become economically independent while also promoting sustainable practices.

The current government has made significant efforts to boost Meghalaya's economy by attracting investment and creating job opportunities. Through a series of policy reforms, the government has simplified the process for starting businesses, particularly in the tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors. Additionally, the government has encouraged small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to flourish, contributing to the local economy and generating employment.

The government's efforts in promoting industrial development, especially in sectors such as mining, manufacturing, and food processing, have also opened up new avenues for job creation and skill development.

Agriculture plays a vital role in Meghalaya's economy, and the present government has made significant strides in improving the livelihoods of farmers. The introduction of subsidies, loans, and training programs on sustainable farming practices has helped improve agricultural productivity. Efforts have also been made to introduce better market linkages for local farmers, ensuring they get fair prices for their produce.

In addition to agriculture, the government has also worked to uplift the state's thriving handicraft industry, which includes weaving, pottery, and woodcraft. By supporting artisans and local craft markets, the government has helped preserve Meghalaya's cultural identity while creating employment opportunities for thousands of people in the rural areas.

The government has taken steps to improve health-

care services, particularly in rural and underserved areas. The establishment of new healthcare centers and the upgrading of existing ones have made healthcare more accessible to the general population. The state has also seen a rise in the number of doctors, nurses, and health workers, helping to improve the quality of medical care in the region.

In the education sector, the present government has focused on increasing literacy rates and providing better opportunities for higher education. New schools have been constructed, and existing ones have been upgraded with modern facilities and teaching resources. Scholarships, skill development programs, and vocational training have also been made available to ensure that young people are better equipped to succeed in the job market.

The government has launched various social welfare schemes aimed at improving the quality of life for vulnerable sections of society, especially women, children, and the elderly. Initiatives such as the distribution of free or subsidized food grains, financial aid for low-income families, and support for the elderly have made a significant difference in the lives of many residents.

"The government's emphasis on promoting eco-tourism has also helped in preserving the state's natural heritage while providing a sustainable source of income to local communities. Many indigenous groups and local entrepreneurs have benefited from the influx of tourists, offering services like homestays, guided tours, and handicraft sales. Agriculture plays a vital role in Meghalaya's economy, and the present government has made significant strides in improving the livelihoods of farmers."

Special attention has been paid to the empowerment of women, with programs focusing on women's health, education, and entrepreneurship. The government has introduced financial support for women's self-help groups, encouraging women to become economically independent while also promoting sustainable practices.

The current government has made significant efforts to boost Meghalaya's economy by attracting investment and creating job opportunities. Through a series of policy reforms, the government has simplified the process for starting businesses, particularly in the tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors. Additionally, the government has encouraged small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to flourish, contributing to the local economy and generating employment.

The government's efforts in promoting industrial development, especially in sectors such as mining, manufacturing, and food processing, have also opened up new avenues for job creation and skill development.

Agriculture plays a vital role in Meghalaya's economy, and the present government has made significant strides in improving the livelihoods of farmers. The introduction of subsidies, loans, and training programs on sustainable farming practices has helped improve agricultural productivity. Efforts have also been made to introduce better market linkages for local farmers, ensuring they get fair prices for their produce.

In addition to agriculture, the government has also worked to uplift the state's thriving handicraft industry, which includes weaving, pottery, and woodcraft. By supporting artisans and local craft markets, the government has helped preserve Meghalaya's cultural identity while creating employment opportunities for thousands of people in the rural areas.

The government has taken steps to improve health-

Letters to the Editor

More on the creative economy

Editor,
In continuation to my letter on the "Growth of creative economy" (ST 12th February 2025) the global conference tourism market is experiencing significant growth, as of 2023, the market size is projected to reach \$ 625.6 billion, and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10.1% from 2023 to 2032. By 2023, the market valuation is anticipated to reach \$1487.2 billion. This growth is driven by factors

such as globalization, technological advancements and the increasing adoption of virtual and hybrid events formats. The industry is also focusing on sustainability and innovation in meeting formats to enhance participant engagement.

The value in India is currently estimated to be around Rs 25,000 crore (approximately \$3 billion). This sector is rapidly growing, driven by factors such as the increasing GDP, a growing urban middle class with higher disposable incomes, and the expansion of state-of-the-art conference facilities. India aims to significantly increase its share in the global conference tourism

market, which is valued around \$280 billion. With the recent inauguration of the Yashobhoimi Convention Centre also known as India International Convention and Expo Centre located in Sector 25, Dwarka, New Delhi and the Bharat Mandapam, located at India Trade Promotion Organisation complex at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi. India is positioning itself as a premier destination for international conferences, meetings and exhibitions.

The prospects for conference tourism in North East India, including Meghalaya are quite promising as the region is known for its stunning landscapes, rich biodi-

versity and cultural heritage. This makes it an attractive destination for conferences, focused on environmental and ecological themes. The diverse ethnic groups and their unique traditions offer a rich cultural experience for conference attendees. There are ongoing efforts to improve infrastructure and promote tourism in the region. This includes developing new tourist destinations and enhancing existing ones.

Meghalaya is home to attractions like the Mawmluh cave, a UNESCO recognized site, which draws adventure enthusiasts from around the world. The state is known for

its warm hospitality, which enhances the experience for conference attendees. Meghalaya is focusing on sustainable tourism, which includes initiatives like Community-Led Tourism Infrastructure Development and eco-tourism promotion. The state is hosting various international conferences, such as the 5th International Conference on Advancing Knowledge from Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Education, Engineering and Technology (ICAKMPET – 2025). Though the exact monetary value of conference tourism in North East India, including Meghalaya is not readily available. However,

considering the overall tourism growth in the region and the increasing number of conferences and events, it is safe to say that the value is substantial and growing. The prospects for conference tourism in North East India and Meghalaya are bright, with focus on sustainability and leveraging the region's natural and cultural assets.

Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

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

"Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light."

— Helen Keller

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 183 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2025

Divided INDIA BLOC

GRANTED that the Congress party is heading the INDIA bloc, it is incumbent on the party to neutralize its main rival BJP's influence wherever possible. Rather, it fought opposition allies in Delhi, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh, unwittingly ensuring the BJP or its allies romped home to victory and causing extreme embarrassment to the INDIA alliance. The Congress now blames the AAP and Arvind Kejriwal for the failure to put up a joint fight. This is true as well. Had Kejriwal been accommodative with the Congress, the results would have been different and the AAP could have retained power. The Congress raised its poor tally from four-plus percent five years ago to six per cent in the Delhi polls this time. Analysts point out that the BJP secured nearly 30 of its 48 seats with a margin of less than two per cent of the polled votes. Had there been an alliance between the AAP and the Congress, the BJP would still have languished in the sidelines.

Looking back, the BJP had managed to retain Haryana and even improve its electoral performance there despite the Congress hopes of capturing power there in the last assembly polls. The failure of the Congress to forge an alliance with some regional parties there proved to be fatal while the BJP laughed its way to an unexpected victory. A similar situation was evident in Andhra Pradesh, where YSR Congress lost power simply because it adamantly decided to fight the polls on its own, rather than cobbling up an alliance with the BJP, with which it was on friendly terms. There is no Congress worth the name in Andhra Pradesh today. YSRC's Jagan Mohan Reddy is rueing his decision to go it alone. Had he allied with the BJP, the two parties could have kept Chandrababu Naidu of the Telugu Desam away from power. Naidu is now digging in his heels and even sharing power in the Modi government in Delhi. He is extracting his pound of flesh from Modi in the form of generous developmental project funding, which would cement his party's base in the state.

Kejriwal was, admittedly on the defensive after the series of scandals that plagued his administration, with some of his ministers ending up in jail one after another. The BJP and Modi made sure to put Kejriwal on his toes as it was important for the saffron edifice to grab power in the national capital. Kejriwal's saga had topped with his own arrest and jailing in the Delhi Liquor Scam. This forced him to eventually quit his post. Having faced such odds he should have had the sense to keep the Congress on his side this time. The AAP government in Punjab might survive for now, as the BJP has only a few MLAs there. However, as it turns out, the INDIA bloc is now a laughing stock.

Letters to the Editor

Well-reasoned article

Editor,
I want to thank my old colleague and a good friend Erwin K Syiem Sutnga for his excellent special article "Debate over Article 371 for Meghalaya: Lessons from Nagaland and Mizoram" (ST February 13, 2025). It was a well-researched article based on facts. Man, you have burnt your midnight oil well. A demand not well reasoned or researched can lead to several negative outcomes. When a demand lacks credibility, it may be dismissed by stakeholders due to its lack of substance and supporting evidence. Decisions based on unsubstantiated demands can result in ineffective or harmful policies and actions, potentially leading to negative consequences for individuals, organisations or society.

Implementing demand without proper research can lead to the inefficient use of resources, as the chosen solutions may not address the root cause of the issue or provide the desired outcomes. Without thorough research, there is a higher risk of unintended negative consequences that were not anticipated, potentially

exacerbating the original problem or creating new issues. Stakeholders and supporters may lose confidence and withdraw their support if they perceive the demand to be poorly thought out and lacking in evidence. To ensure demands are effective and well-received, it is important to base them on comprehensive research, sound reasoning, and clear evidence. This approach increases the likelihood of achieving positive outcomes and gaining the support of key stakeholders.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

Can society laugh away filthy jokes and obscenities?

Editor,
How one wishes for individuals to climb the ladder of success without compromising their integrity. But in a digital world where virtue struggles to compete with vice, too many have instead stooped to exploiting base carnal desires and controversy just to attract more eyeballs. The recent uproar over Ranveer Allahbadia's

Thank You For The Music... Oops... Pre-budget Discussion

By Patricia Mukhim

Meghalaya must be the first state in the country where the Chief Minister himself presented a pre-budget kaleidoscope to an online and offline audience invited to the Secretariat. The CM was assisted by Commissioner and Secretary Finance, Dr Vijay Kumar. Both are wizards at finances and know the story behind each of the figures they presented. One interesting facet about Dr Vijay Kumar's academic journey is his PhD in Economics and Public Policy from Oxford University. His study includes the Economics of Education where he evaluated the impact of India's national school choice policy on children's outcomes and investigated related questions central to the theoretical and empirical debates on school choice in developing countries.

Chief Minister Conrad Sangma got his degree in business administration in entrepreneurial management from the Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania and later completed his MBA in Finance from Imperial College London. There couldn't have been a better combo to deal with the nitty gritty of the state's finances. However, since Conrad Sangma is a Financial Management person he is essentially trained to plan, organize, direct and control the financial activities of the corporate world which includes procurement and utilization of funds of the enterprise. In short it means applying general management principles to financial resources of the enterprise. Unfortunately, running an enterprise is entirely different from running a state. In an enterprise you have the luxury of employing the best minds but a state is a mix of the best and the worst; the most intelligent and the ignorant. Often, it's the ignoramuses that call the shots without any evidence to back their demands. This is the toughest part about politics. A business is much easier to run because at the end of the day an enterprise is measured by the profits it manages to yield. In a state the outcomes are measured by human development.

Dr Vijay Kumar is a development economist and assists the Chief Minister with making a budget to cater to a very diverse population comprising the affluent (high level) and the poorest of the poor - the 37% of Meghalaya's population living below poverty line. What sort of budget would pull them out of the quagmire of poverty? Do we have any scholar who has done intensive and extensive research on poverty and why some people

are just not able to make it through the dark night of the soul? What is missing in their lives which condemns them to that gruelling life of never being able to send their kids to school and even to manage two square meals a day? And this in a supposedly egalitarian tribal society where clans are supposed to not abandon their kin.

Since Dr Vijay Kumar has specialised on school choice policy, one wishes he was given more scope to take a close look at the educational system in Meghalaya and why there are schools with zero enrolment but are still allowed to continue to feature in the government's books of accounts and teachers receive their salaries. Firstly, our schools sort children according to their ability to do well on standardized tests while slighting the innate wisdom held in the body which is just

ered the farmers. Government somehow is unwilling to spend long enough time to monitor the implementation of a particular scheme and to do a course correction if for some reason the schemes lacked conceptual clarity.

A government that is sincere in its intent to financially empower its citizens by devising multifarious schemes should also not shy away from conducting field-based studies to monitor the schemes step by step and measure outcomes. It's not easy to take a particular scheme to the people and expect all the stakeholders to understand what their contribution and participation should be.

It is an admitted fact that CM Conrad Sangma is heavily invested in the budget making exercise and even knows exactly which number slide in the presentation pertains to questions asked

"The desired outcome of FOCUS was that the groups would work in tandem and put the Rs 5000 in a corpus for pursuing the collective goals mentioned above. But not all farmers used that money the way it was intended. Many purchased consumables because farmers in Meghalaya are essentially poor. Hence devising schemes that suffer at the implementation stage is a bad idea."

as important for navigating life. Also, our economic models seem to be inherently faulty because they are based on the idea that humans are rational creatures, who coolly calculate their self-interest. But nothing can be further from the truth. The Rs 5000 given to farmers in 2023 December under the Farmers' Collectivization for Upscaling Production and Marketing Systems (FOCUS) was intended to support farmer producer groups through funding for value chain development, machinery support, market linkages, transportation, and aggregation of produce.

The desired outcome of FOCUS was that the groups would work in tandem and put the Rs 5000 in a corpus for pursuing the collective goals mentioned above. But not all farmers used that money the way it was intended. Many purchased consumables because farmers in Meghalaya are essentially poor. Hence devising schemes that suffer at the implementation stage is a bad idea. Besides, we have so little follow up study on whether the scheme was truly successful and empow-

er by the participants in the open session on February 12. He answered questions that came on the chatbox on Facebook live. Dr Vijay Kumar ably assisted him when he floundered. That sort of camaraderie is rare between a minister and a bureaucrat.

What was positive about the exercise was also the patience with which both Conrad Sangma and Dr Vijay Kumar listened to the participants, answered their queries and also took note of their suggestions, particularly the suggestions pertaining to single women-headed households and other issues related to problems faced by women as highlighted by Kong Theilin Phanhuh. Former Chairperson of the State Women's Commission. There were strong advocates for farmers' welfare and the CM seemed to have taken note of their grievances.

Having made my observations about the pre-budget presentation, I feel there was an unnecessary hurry to explain away a number of queries raised by professors from the Economics Department of NEHU. Questions were raised about the SASCI scheme which stands for

Scheme for Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment. This is a Government of India initiative to provide financial assistance to state governments in the form of interest free loans for capital investment projects such as for developing iconic tourist centres across the country. This is a 50-year interest free loan from the central government. What was also pointed out was the revenue leakage especially in excise and minerals. The budget shows zero revenue accrual from minerals since coal mining was banned but what about limestone and boulders to the tune of 300-400 trucks per day going to Bangladesh? The CM said that aspect would be looked into.

What is perhaps a matter that is often overlooked is the attempt by the MDA Government to empower women vide the Self Help Group (SHG) mode. Between 2018-2024 there has been a 5-fold increase in SHGs. From 10,706 SHGs in 2018 to 49,406 in 2024 which include gender and health activists. For 5400 voluntary organisations an amount of Rs 1000 crore has been invested. What's also interesting is that there is 50% reservation for women in Village Employment Councils for implementation of the MNREGA.

Chief Minister Conrad Sangma did admit though that tackling the problems besieging the educational sector is the most difficult challenge. Add to that is the persistent problem that all governments in Meghalaya face which is that all projects exceed the timeline thereby leading to time and cost overruns. Whether this is intentionally done by the project implementers (State PWD Department) to enable contractors to demand escalation costs needs to be investigated.

The Chief Minister has stated upfront that citizens' grievances would be addressed upfront especially when he holds the CM Connect programme across the state. This is where people have to be empowered to speak up and list out their grievances because it has to be admitted that the weakest link in the chain is the administrative hierarchy. Unless the delivery system is strengthened and there is a strict monitoring system in place, last end implementation of schemes will always be a problem. The Meghalaya Government has to put in place a robust monitoring and evaluation system using its consultants.

Returning to move forward: How the Biare revisit their past to shape their future

By Anna Notsu

In Meghalaya, a state known for its matrilineal traditions, the Biare community stands out for its patrilineality, distinct way of life, language, food and architecture. 'The Biare are one of a kind,' a friend from Saipung, a large Biare village in East Jaintia, proudly told me. Nestled in and around the Saipung Reserve Forest - Meghalaya's oldest notified reserve - the Biare community is rediscovering who they are while navigating systemic challenges.

Despite their cultural wealth, the Biare often remain overshadowed by larger groups in the region. They frequently bear reductive labels like "primitive" and "backwards." Yet beyond such misconceptions tied to their isolation, lie stunning historical artefacts - ancient stone jars, monoliths, generations of agricultural knowledge and vibrant dances and songs - waiting to be shared.

I kept returning to Saipung, each visit enhancing my connection to the Biare land and its people. The road conditions never deterred me from returning. As I settled into the village for my third visit, staying over a month, my friends became like family, and local children lovingly called me eni (auntie). The immersion in the everyday life of Saipung gradually led me to wonder how they have come to be who they are. Saipung, to me, became a place of imagination: What was life like in the past? What continues to shape current livelihoods? And what has been discontinued?

The village name itself is telling: Saipung, meaning "where elephants multiply," was once a hub of elephants. Today, they are long gone. When I asked them about their heritage, many struggled to find an answer. As Christianity took root, it led to a decline in the documentation of pre-Christian practices, which were often passed down orally. What remains are faint memories and enigmatic artefacts, like the monolith by the PHC. Where are the stories? How did their environment change? And how does the Biare youth make sense of their distant past?

With these personal wonders, the Kirzai Project emerged. It means "returning," aimed at bridging generations and encouraging schoolchildren to rediscover buried connections with the great past. We did this through stories about the environment from their elders and by expressing them through art. The project had two parts: story collection and drawing, to ultimately create a children's book. To foster a sense of accomplishment and friendly competition, we organised story-writing and drawing contests. The intergenerational enthusiasm has been palpable throughout. The project is no longer mine, but ours. However, the Award Ceremony, where authors of the selected stories were to receive certificates and prize money, was unfortunately twice rescheduled due to blackouts - a common occurrence in the Saipung area, especially in summer. With no electricity, families relying on water pumps must carry water from nearby spring wells and streams. Even then, Biates in Saipung maintain their optimism.

"We are lucky because we have streams," one villager told me, "We can wash our clothes there." Blackouts can last days or sometimes even weeks. Phone batteries die and power banks also quickly run out of charge. After dusk, the whole village falls silent, with only a handful of people walking outside with a torch in hand.

I was deeply saddened by this turn of events. Postponing the programme caused many schoolchildren to miss the ceremony. Some had to return to Kliehriat, Jowai and Shillong as the new term was starting. While having blackouts is beyond anyone's control, should this be an accepted reality in Saipung? Just as their roads remain cracked, cleft and dented, the absence of support and attention seems to leave the Saipung area in the dark.

At the same time, such inconvenience gathers people around the hearth with chapak (Biare-red tea) accompanied by a little jaggery - a beloved Biare custom. In a pitch-black kitchen, the flickering firelight illuminates their faces, casting warm glows on their bodies wrapped in scarves and throws, as they huddle together. There is little to do but exchange jokes, share harmless gossip and enjoy quiet conversations. Relatives and neighbours also join a circle of laughter. The place, otherwise filled with various sounds of social media, reunites them showing a glimpse of how olden times used to be.

Observing these gatherings at the ritap (Biare hearth), I wondered about how folktales were once passed down. The stories collected by schoolchildren varied in length and content. But many revolved around themes of siblinghood, small animals and everyday surroundings like nathial-kung (moi moi leaves). As the Biare youth illustrated tales of forests, animals and mountains, their imaginations wove past and present together. We were all awed by their creativity and talent and how the schoolchildren engaged with the environment through Biare folktales.

The Kirzai Project was not without challenges. Beyond blackouts, I faced difficulties in explaining the concept, mobilising busy families, translating stories, and setting up competitions and ceremonies. With limited time, resources and experience, I had to adapt and innovate on the fly.

In the end, what mattered was not the perfection of the process but the connections we forged. One girl at the ceremony, jumping and dancing on a wobbly stage of stacked school tables, shouted, "So many people are here!" A small classroom served as a makeshift community hall, glowing with the excited screams and applause of those who came to celebrate on a cold windy evening. With help at every step, I slowly learned to find a way through - just like the Biates in Saipung.

One officer I met in Shillong remarked that Saipung's fractured roads and other hardships could even be marketed as a tourist attraction. While Biates indeed excel at creating joyous moments even in adverse situations, framing their daily struggles as a novelty is misguided.

The challenges in Saipung - frequent blackouts, water scarcity, seemingly perpetually broken roads, acidic soils and heavy trucks loaded with logs coating everything in dust - are systemic issues that demand urgent action. Their resilience, often romanticised, has two sides. One reflects their collective efforts to make things work no matter what the circumstances, while the other highlights the unaddressed root causes. Before fully embracing the former, the latter requires closer attention.

While Kirzai means "returning," this project revealed something deeper: the Biare's commitment, creativity and cooperative nature that mobilised an entire community to think forward. This intergenerational collaboration showed no signs of them being "backward" but imagining and building futures rooted in what it means to be Biare today and their aspirations. The Biare youth have shown us that returning to the past can be a powerful way to shape the future.

Now, with these collected stories and inspiring paintings in hand, I, too, look forward - not just to what lies ahead for the Biare, but to how their past continues to shape it.

(The author is a PhD scholar from Leiden University, The Netherlands currently doing research in Jaintia Hills. Her PhD research is part of a five-year project, *Futuring Heritage: Conservation, Community and Contestation in the Eastern Himalayas*, initiated by Leiden University and Ashoka University).

a Child Turned Mother" (December 13, 2024)?

In view of the plight of single mothers, Michael Syiem, the founder and president of Maitshaphrang, rues, "Easy marital breakups have brought untold misery and agony to single mothers. What kind of measures have we taken to address this social malaise when there is still no strict implementation of compulsory registration of marriage?"

Yes, without rhyme or reason, relationships are formed, and they fall apart just easily. Whether one agrees or not, when morality erodes, relationships weaken, and when relationships weaken, society crumbles - everything is interconnected. Consequently, countless single mothers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, face agony, regret, and a lifetime of silent suffering. I wonder how we have allowed depraved individuals to wreak havoc on our societies and family values.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

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

shockingly inappropriate remarks on 'India's Got Latent' is a glaring example of this trend.

Well, I personally admire Ranveer for his impressive intellectual calibre as a YouTuber with over 10 million subscribers. However, his obscene question to the contestants offended many, proving that academic achievements alone do not make a person responsible or morally sound. One of Ranveer's subscribers from BeerBiceps commented, "What does it say about our society when those who are supposed to impart right knowledge and wisdom instead lead their followers astray? Instead of upholding integrity, they sacrifice it for quick likes, clicks, and views." Of course, his incident isn't just about one offensive remark - it exposes a deeper decay within our digital world and its increasingly insidious impact on the younger generation.

With over 90% of our teenagers actively using social media and spending more than four hours a day consuming inappropriate content, the influence of these so-called "influencers" is deeply concerning. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are overflowing with vulgar and obscene reels and videos, many of them created by a host of influencers, mushrooming third-rate media agencies, and young people, including school teenagers. With each passing day, their numbers are multiplying at an alarming rate, attracting millions of youths to their compulsive indulgences. If obscenity becomes the norm, what kind of future are we building for our children?

Who else has inspired our youth to create and upload such obscene reels and videos on social media if not the so-called influencers and entertainment figures? Needless to say, many actors and content creators have risen to fame by producing nothing but vulgar films, serials, comedies, and short clips. These days, their success is measured by likes and views. Just take a look at what's also trending on OTT platforms --- it's truly shocking. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before society finds itself grappling with countless pervers and sexual offenders.

If some still believe that constant exposure to depravity leaves no imprint on young minds, then they fail to grasp a fundamental truth - thought is the seed of action, and what we feed the mind today will manifest in our behaviour tomorrow. Well, a society that normal-

izes obscenity cannot expect virtue to flourish. Thus, I strongly feel that educated leaders and policymakers should pause to consider the long-term consequences of this trend a decade from now.

One concerned citizen laments how easy access to pornography has corrupted young minds beyond repair. What's even more unfortunate is that most of our leaders and elite intellectuals remain conspicuously silent on this, as if nothing is happening. They completely ignore the humiliation, stereotypes, and inhumane abuse of females in this depraved world.

Pragmatically speaking, even one very short-lived sexual encounter between opposite sexes can trap a young girl in a vortex of lifelong regret and distress, so it should be a serious concern. Doesn't such a reality demand extreme caution? Just as a small crack can shatter an entire glass at any moment, reckless indulgence can potentially fracture a life. Furthermore, hasn't today's digital world, with its excessive exposure to filthy content, fuelled a steep rise in teenage pregnancies, as also pointed out by senior journalist Patricia Mukhim through her article, "Teenage Pregnancy: Trauma of

many of them created by a host of influencers, mushrooming third-rate media agencies, and young people, including school teenagers. With each passing day, their numbers are multiplying at an alarming rate, attracting millions of youths to their compulsive indulgences. If obscenity becomes the norm, what kind of future are we building for our children?

Who else has inspired our youth to create and upload such obscene reels and videos on social media if not the so-called influencers and entertainment figures? Needless to say, many actors and content creators have risen to fame by producing nothing but vulgar films, serials, comedies, and short clips. These days, their success is measured by likes and views. Just take a look at what's also trending on OTT platforms --- it's truly shocking. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before society finds itself grappling with countless pervers and sexual offenders.

If some still believe that constant exposure to depravity leaves no imprint on young minds, then they fail to grasp a fundamental truth - thought is the seed of action, and what we feed the mind today will manifest in our behaviour tomorrow. Well, a society that normal-

"Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value."

— Albert Einstein

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No.184 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2025

Elections Amplify Victimhood Syndrome

ELECTIONS to the two District Councils are scheduled for February 21. Meanwhile political parties go around playing loud music, knowing fully well how easy it is to lull people by playing with their emotions. Drew Westen in his book, "The Political Brain," has demonstrated how people vote with their emotions and not with their rational brains. Music also releases dopamine - the feel-good hormone. Politicians and their campaign curators have understood human responses to different stimuli and have realised that song and music score above rhetorical political speech-making. Naturally political parties these days send groups of supporters to different constituencies and play their theme songs throughout the day. When the lyrics hit the right chords they resonate with people. But what is observed is also that the public is exhausted. People no longer want to listen to speeches which are either aimed at demonising and castigating a political rival or of adding to the list of protectionisms which exacerbate the victimhood syndrome and create fear. Voters now know that 99 % of the election promises made will never materialise.

The political class always thinks of problems that defy solutions and they perpetuate those problems. Psychologists who have studied the subject say that those afflicted with the victimhood syndrome act inconsistently. One moment, they present themselves dramatically as victims; the next, they morph into victimizers. In Meghalaya it has been observed over the decades that elections are used as platforms for the blame game. The non-tribal is always the favourite whipping boy. He is responsible for 'taking away' the business opportunities of the tribal. The non-tribal is presented as the one with a greed for land and who aspires to settle down in tribal land and therefore the demand for the Inner Line Permit (ILP) something that is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. But it is an emotive election ploy.

The tribal youth instead of learning to compete are told that they are not as intelligent as their non-tribal peers even if this is not borne out by any research. Young people who venture out of Meghalaya and have an open vista to showcase their talents don't show any signs of being second to their non-tribal peers. It's the youth who shirks hard work and aims to get things the easy way who are also the biggest complainers that they are deprived of opportunities. And politicians and the plethora of pressure groups riding on the same bandwagon of competing on what to add to the list of protectionist policies, only add to the noise. Of course, they gain in insidious ways by doing so. People are so used to this game that they become victims by choice. And ironically, they are frequently successful in finding willing victimizers. For such 'victims' even their way of absorbing information causes chaos and stress. But this game is repeated in every election and it continues because no one dares call out the lie.

Letters to the Editor

Importance of project monitoring

The special article "Thank you for the Music...Oops... Pre-Budget discussion," by Patricia Mukhim (ST February 14, 2025) made interesting reading. The initiative of the MDA 2.0 government under the leadership of Conrad K Sangma, the Chief Minister of Meghalaya assisted by his able bureaucrat Dr Vijay Kumar presenting a pre-budget discussion which is a first of its kind in the country is commendable. However, the issues raised by Patricia Mukhim in her article on qualifications, business, the poorest of poor, education, economic models etc; are very important. What prompts me to comment on her special article is on the concluding paragraph "The Meghalaya Government has to put in place a robust monitoring and evaluation system using its consultants."

When I was with the Ministry of Home Affairs, GOI posted in the North Eastern Council, many times it has been observed that projects implemented by the NE States show some output but do not show how it impacts or how it is beneficial to society and timeliness of the projects are missing. I hope things have changed today. Outcome of a project is monitorable. For example, it must be ensured that a road is not built if there is no village to benefit from it. Therefore, the outcome of a project must be identified and as such

the output/outcome monitoring framework has to be in place when the design of a project is submitted by the stakeholders. Output and outcome monitoring frameworks are crucial when designing a project under a given scheme because they provide a structured approach to measuring and evaluating the success and impact of the project.

These frameworks are essential for accountability, as monitoring frameworks hold project stakeholders accountable by providing transparent metrics on project performance. Clear responsibilities are assigned to team members, ensuring that everyone knows their roles and expectations. When we talk of performance measurement, outputs are the immediate results of project activities, such as the number of workshops conducted or reports generated. Monitoring this helps ensure that the project is on track with its planned activities. Outcomes are long-term impacts of the project, such as improved literacy rates or reduced pollution levels. Monitoring outcomes helps assess the effectiveness and sustainability of the project. When it comes to decision-making, monitoring frameworks provide data that can inform decision-making, allowing project managers to make adjustments and improvements in real-time. By identifying potential issues early, monitoring frameworks help mitigate risks and prevent project failures.

As far as resource allocation is concerned, monitoring helps ensure that resources (time, money, personnel) are

used efficiently and effectively. It helps prioritize activities and allocate resources to the most impactful areas of the project. Coming to continuous improvement, a feedback loop provides for continuous learning and improvement, allowing the project to refine strategies and approaches. It helps identify best practices and lessons learned that can be applied to future projects. There is a need to engage stakeholders and keep them informed about project progress and impact, fostering trust and collaboration. Similarly encouraging participation of stakeholders and buy-in, ensures that the project aligns with the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries.

The seventh point is impact assessment which enables a comprehensive evaluation of the project's impact on target populations and environments and assesses the potential for scaling up successful initiatives and replicating them in different contexts. Hence by having a robust output and outcome monitoring framework in place, project managers can ensure that their projects achieve their goals, deliver meaningful results and make a positive impact.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Suspension of American tariffs for 30 days

Editor,
It is good news for Canada

and Mexico that the Trump administration has suspended the import tariffs for one month but as per media reports some establishments had already shunted out some of their employees. This underscores the unpredictability of trade policy under Trump and such type of uncertainty harms the business environment and yields short term gains. Also the broader consequences of this approach both politically and economically remains uncertain. It is also mentioned that this pause will not be applicable in the case of China.

In Trump's own words, "As president, it is my responsibility to ensure the safety of ALL Americans, and I am doing just that. I am very pleased with this initial outcome," Trump further said Canada would appoint a "fentanyl czar" and launch a joint strike force with the US to combat crime, fentanyl and money laundering. Trump has framed tariffs as a tool for growing the US economy, protecting jobs and raising tax revenues. Trump believes that as far as tariffs are concerned no one can compete with the USA because it is the pot of gold. However America must also keep winning and keep doing well to be in that pot of gold.

Trump can claim victory by securing commitments from Mexico and Canada on border security and fentanyl trafficking which are the key issues for his administration. It is well known that by positioning himself as a tough negotiator he reinforces his image as a leader willing to use economic pressure to achieve domestic policy goals

because during electioneering he had made such commitments before the voters. For Canada the tariff delay provides temporary relief especially as its leadership faces political transitions. Border security measures and anti-fentanyl initiatives were already in motion but the latest agreement adds further commitments.

Canadian businesses however remain on edge, knowing that Trump's approach to trade remains fluid as they had the experience of his previous term. The economic relationship between the two neighbours, traditionally built on stability and mutual benefit, has become increasingly fragile due to these recurring threats from the Trump administration.

Mexico, under President Claudia Sheinbaum, managed to secure a short-term victory by negotiating a 30-day pause on tariffs, effectively averting a potentially devastating economic blow. This reprieve was a result of a tense negotiation in which Ms Sheinbaum agreed to deploy 10,000 National Guard troops along Mexico's northern border. Their primary mission would be to curb illegal immigration and address the smuggling of fentanyl into the US, critical issues for the Trump administration. In addition to this border security agreement, President Sheinbaum also committed to address the trafficking of high-powered firearms into Mexico to curb cartel violence.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There is only so much thinking most of us can do in our heads. Try dividing 16,951 by 67 without reaching for a pen and paper. Or a calculator. Try doing the weekly shopping without a list on the back of last week's receipt. Or on your phone.

By relying on these devices to help make our lives easier, are we making ourselves smarter or dumber? Have we traded efficiency gains for inching ever closer to idiocy as a species? This question is especially important to consider with regard to generative artificial intelligence (AI) technology such as ChatGPT, an AI chatbot owned by tech company OpenAI, which at the time of writing is used by 300 million people each week.

According to a recent paper by a team of researchers from Microsoft and Carnegie Mellon University in the United States, the answer might be yes. But there's more to the story.

Thinking well

The researchers assessed how users perceive the effect of generative AI on their own critical thinking.

Generally speaking, critical thinking has to do with thinking well.

One way we do this is by judging our own thinking processes against established norms and methods of good reasoning. These norms include values such as precision, clarity, accuracy, breadth, depth, relevance, significance and cogency of arguments.

Other factors that can affect quality of thinking include the influence of our existing world views, cognitive biases, and reliance on incomplete or inaccurate mental models.

The authors of the recent study adopt a definition of critical thinking developed by American educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom and colleagues in 1956. It's not really a definition at all. Rather it's a hierarchical way to categorise cognitive skills, including recall of information, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

The authors state they prefer this categorisation, also known as a "taxonomy", because it's simple and easy to apply. However, since it was devised it has fallen out of favour and has been discredited by Robert Marzano and indeed by Bloom himself.

In particular, it assumes there is a hierarchy of cognitive skills in which so-called "higher-order" skills are built upon "lower-order" skills.

This does not hold on logical or evidence-based grounds. For example, evaluation, usually seen as a culminating or higher-order process, can

Is AI making us stupider?



be the beginning of inquiry or very easy to perform in some contexts. It is more the context than the cognition that determines the sophistication of thinking.

An issue with using this taxonomy in the study is that many generative AI products also seem to use it to guide their own output. So you could interpret this study as testing whether generative AI, by the way it's designed, is effective at framing how users think about critical thinking.

Also missing from Bloom's taxonomy is a fundamental aspect of critical thinking: the fact that the critical thinker not only performs these and many other cognitive skills, but performs them well. They do this because they have an overarching concern

for the truth, which is something AI systems do not have.

Higher confidence in AI equals less critical thinking Research published earlier this year revealed "a significant negative correlation between frequent AI tool usage and critical thinking abilities".

The new study further explores this idea. It surveyed 319 knowledge workers such as healthcare practitioners, educators and engineers who discussed 936 tasks they conducted with the help of generative AI.

Interestingly, the study found users consider themselves to use critical thinking less in the execution of the task, than in providing oversight at the verification and editing stages.

In high-stakes work environments, the desire to produce high-quality work combined with fear of reprisals serve as powerful motivators for users to engage their critical thinking in reviewing the outputs of AI.

But overall, participants believe the increases in efficiency more than compensate for the effort expended in providing such oversight.

The study found people who had higher confidence in AI generally displayed less critical thinking, while people with higher confidence in themselves tended to display more critical thinking.

This suggests generative AI does not harm one's critical thinking - provided one has it to begin with.

Problematically, the study relied

too much on self-reporting, which can be subject to a range of biases and interpretation issues.

Putting this aside, critical thinking was defined by users as "setting clear goals, refining prompts, and assessing generated content to meet specific criteria and standards".

"Criteria and standards" here refer more to the purposes of the task than to the purposes of critical thinking. For example, an output meets the criteria if it "complies with their queries", and the standards if the "generated artefact is functional" for the workplace.

This raises the question of whether

the study was really measuring critical thinking at all.

Becoming a critical thinker

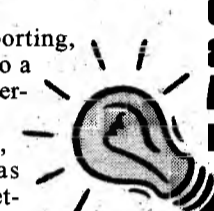
Implicit in the new study is the idea that exercising critical thinking at the oversight stage is at least better than an unreflective over-reliance on generative AI.

The authors recommend generative AI developers add features to trigger users' critical oversight. But is this enough? Critical thinking is needed at every stage before and while using AI - when formulating questions and hypotheses to be tested, and when interrogating outputs for bias and accuracy. The only way to ensure generative AI does not harm your critical thinking is to become a critical thinker before you use it.

Becoming a critical thinker requires identifying and challenging unstated assumptions behind claims and evaluating diverse perspectives. It also requires practising systematic and methodical reasoning and reasoning collaboratively to test your ideas and thinking with others.

Chalk and chalkboards made us better at mathematics. Can generative AI make us better at critical thinking? Maybe - if we are careful, we might be able to use generative AI to challenge ourselves and augment our critical thinking. But in the meantime, there are always steps we can, and should, take to improve our critical thinking instead of letting an AI do the thinking for us. (*The Conversation*)

Have we traded efficiency gains for inching ever closer to idiocy as a species? According to a recent paper by a team of researchers from Microsoft and Carnegie Mellon University in the United States, the answer might be yes. But there's more to the story



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 16, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is opposite Venus on your solar return chart. It will bring exceptional results for you during the whole year. Your communications skills will be strong and you will be able to express yourself more with those people with whom you interact. You will be able to use your talent and strength in the best possible manner. You will make good progress at your work place. And will also get appreciation and recognition from colleagues and superiors for your efforts. You will outshine everyone at your workplace. Your financial position will be extremely strong. A female friend will support you and could also help you professionally. You will fall in love with someone special. Your family will support you in all matters. Business related trips will keep you busy. These will help you develop contacts which will prove to very beneficial for you later on.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You would enjoy doing things with others at work and at home, as synergy and cooperation are available to you. You would most successfully perform tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about priorities. Study business offers and professional opportunities in detail. Instead of feeling hurt and suffering mentally, be patient and positive, as things are likely to turn around in a positive direction in a few days.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) There will be fabulous results for domestic and work related matters. You are strong and masterful while turning things around in a positive direction at work. Think about long term gain as opposed to quick fix solutions. Media and the arts involve you in creative pastimes. You enjoy love and admiration of the family. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through writing or some forms of art. A strong desire for companionship and sociability dominates during this period. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work. Sports people also benefit from the planetary alignment as they are infused with positive energy and gain recognition.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This phase brings responsibilities, seriousness and sensitivity in relations. You are bold and adventurous right now and you cannot tolerate delays, restrictions, or any form of authority that prevents you from behaving exactly the way you want to. Your drive for personal freedom and insistence on your rights is pressing, and a confrontation in which you have to stand up for yourself is likely. You will be needed to provide inputs and your presence may also be required at home and work and you will have to divide your attention according to priorities. This is good time to achieve balance between the head and the heart, and that too in all relationships.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) There will be mixed results as success and good fortune at work opens new horizons for expansion and travel. Some changes in the business set up are on the cards. You bring stability and order in business and professional projects with a dynamic and assertive approach. You come up with original and creative ideas that surprise other in the professional area. You support people with loyalty and zeal. A person makes an impact on you and it is hard to stop thinking of this strange connection. Your relationship with your partner is rather tenacious at the moment and requires extra attention and care. Emotive issues arise with family members. Your career, reputation, and public life are influenced.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) An increase in funds brings monetary gains and you may earn from investments made earlier. There will be times when you feel stressed over details. You may want to plan every move but serendipity has some happy surprises in store. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are headed. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for the current planetary placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits. Your romantic relationship takes on an added intensity and you receive more than you anticipated from your partner. This draws you closer on other levels too.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) An excellent time awaits you especially regarding money and career. Feeling secure and comfortable on the job is important to you now. Money matters move smoothly even as expenses rise. It is time to get serious about other aspects of life

management too. You work towards happiness and solidarity in friendship and love and this helps you get your health and relationships back on track. You reconnect with friends and focus your attention on your relationships with your family including children. The unattached are likely to meet someone who stimulates them mentally and a great period of togetherness could ensue.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This is a positive period that brings sincerity, cooperation and harmony in relationships. This is an excellent time under which to work on resolving differences in values or problems with joint finances in a close relationship. Old friends and close family communicate good news and remain in touch when you need to share views and feelings. This is a great time to present your ideas and to make your mark at your place of work. Your innovative ideas elicit a favourable response from peers and seniors alike. Be objective as prejudices and notions could color your view on how you tackle a given situation. Health needs the attention it deserves.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are likely to swing to extremes this week, sometimes being happy, celebratory and at other times low, serious and depressed. Professional situations and personal relations are sensitive and tend to go through ups and downs. Finances and material effects need to be evaluated, do not make investments or speculate heavily. You are involved in multiple activities and need to avoid mental stress. It is the right time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills as your workload too increases. You have to develop more energy for work and your daily routine tends to speed up now. It's a fabulous time for joining a gym or stepping up exercise and health routines.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Financial gains and profits from business are on the cards. This can be a time of achievement, career advancement, and success in business. Work-related travel or reaching out to more people is possible now. It is more about how you express yourself than the specifics of what you are saying that helps sway others to your position. Recognition is likely to come your way whether you ask for it or not, and the responsibility that comes right along with it. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are at your most visible during this week.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) This phase brings excellent opportunities for love and fun. A love affair may become a little more serious. Spending time with someone special is a focus. You pour more energy into self-promotion activities. It is a good time to work out money problems or other issues of sharing with a partner. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities in these areas of life. This is an especially spiritual time for you—a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you. You enjoy doing things with others at work and home, as synergy and cooperation are available to you now.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This is a time of profitable productivity. Your mind is clear, decisive and organized in professional matters. You keep things in perspective and handle many issues and facets with ease and speed. You may feel professional unstable and emotionally insecure for a short while. You tend to apply too much force suddenly it's better to take one steady step at a time to climb the ladder of success. Your heart is with your home and family, if you happen to be traveling during this week, a romantic adventure may be on the cards. A focused effort in any direction brings success.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) Work issues are emphasized as well as mental and physical health. You are called upon to deal with the details and practicalities of everyday life, to become more organized, and to take charge of your routines. Circumstances are such that you need to develop some healthy habits, routines, and schedules. Believing in a grand plan is fine, but practical concerns need to be dealt with as well. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. A business venture could be gainful if you are willing to lend it some energy. A relaxed and light attitude would help you overcome negative thoughts.

An unexpected anomaly in the Pacific Ocean could be a global time marker

Earth must have experienced something exceptional 10 million years ago. Our study of rock samples from the floor of the Pacific Ocean has found a strange increase in the radioactive isotope beryllium-10 during that time.

This finding, now published in *Nature Communications*, opens new pathways for geologists to date past events gleaned from deep within the oceans.

But the cause of the beryllium-10 anomaly remains unknown. Could it have been major shifts in global ocean currents, a dying star, or an interstellar collision? Extremely slow rocks deep in the ocean. I am on a hunt for stardust on Earth. Previously, I've sifted through snow in Antarctica. This time, it was the depths of the ocean.

At a depth of about 5,000 metres, the abyssal zone of the Pacific Ocean has never seen light, yet something does still grow there.

Ferromanganese crusts - metallic underwater rocks - grow from minerals dissolved in the water slowly coming together and solidifying over extremely long time scales, as little as a few millimetres in a million years. (Stalactites and stalagmites in caves grow in a similar way, but thousands of times faster.) This makes ferromanganese crusts ideal archives for capturing stardust over millions of years.

The age of these crusts can be determined by radiometric dating using the radioactive isotope beryllium-10.

This isotope is continuously produced in the upper atmosphere when highly energetic cosmic rays strike air molecules. The strikes break apart the main components of our air - nitrogen and oxygen - into smaller fragments.

Both stardust and beryllium-10 eventually find their way into Earth's oceans where they become incorporated into the growing ferromanganese crust.

One of the largest ferromanganese crusts was recovered in 1976 from the Central Pacific. Stored for decades at the Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources in Hanover, Germany, a 3.7kg section of it became the subject of my analysis.

Much like tree rings reveal a tree's age, ferromanganese crusts record

their growth in layers over millions of years.

Beryllium-10 undergoes radioactive decay really slowly, meaning it gradually breaks down over millions of years as it sits in the rocks.

As beryllium-10 decays over time, its concentration decreases in deeper, older sediment layers. Because the rate of decay is steady, we can use radioactive isotopes as natural stopwatches to discern the age and history of rocks - this is called radioactive dating.

A puzzling anomaly

After extensive chemical processing, my colleagues and I used accelerator mass spectrometry - an ultra-sensitive analytical technique for longer-lived radioactive isotopes - to measure beryllium-10 concentrations in the crust.

This time, my research took me from Canberra, Australia to Dresden, Germany, where the setup at the Helmholtz-Zentrum Dresden-Rossendorf was optimised for beryllium-10 measurements.

The results showed that the crust had grown only 3.5 centimetres over the past 10 million years and was more than 20 million years old.

However, before I could return to my search for stardust, I encountered an anomaly.

Initially, as I searched back in time, the beryllium-10 concentration declined as expected, following its natural decay pattern - until about 10 million years ago. At that point, the expected decrease halted before resuming its normal pattern around 12 million years ago.

This was puzzling: radioactive decay follows strict laws, meaning something must have introduced extra beryllium-10 into the crust at that time.

Scepticism is crucial in science. To rule out errors, I repeated the chemical preparation and measurements multiple times - yet the anomaly persisted.

The analysis of different crusts from locations nearly 3,000km away gave the same result, a beryllium-10 anomaly around 10 million years ago. This confirmed that the anomaly was a real event rather than a local irregularity.

Ocean currents or exploding stars?

What could have happened on

Earth to cause this anomaly 10 million years ago? We're not sure, but there are a few options.

Last year, an international study revealed that the Antarctic Circumpolar Current - the main driver of global ocean circulation - intensified around 12 million years ago, influencing Antarctic ocean current patterns.

Could this beryllium-10 anomaly in the Pacific mark the beginning of the modern global ocean circulation? If ocean currents were responsible, beryllium-10 would be distributed unevenly on Earth with some samples even showing a lack of beryllium-10. New samples from all major oceans and both hemispheres would allow us to answer this question.

Another possibility emerged early last year.

Astrophysicists demonstrated that a collision with a dense interstellar cloud could compress the heliosphere - the Sun's protective shield against cosmic radiation - back to the orbit of Mercury. Without this barrier, Earth would be exposed to an increased cosmic ray flux, leading to an elevated global beryllium-10 production rate.

A near-Earth supernova explosion could also cause an increased cosmic ray flux leading to a beryllium-10 anomaly. Future research will explore these possibilities.

The discovery of such an anomaly is a windfall for geological dating. Various archives are used to investigate Earth's climate, habitability and environmental conditions over different timescales.

To compare ice cores with sediments, ferromanganese crusts, speleothems (stalagmites and stalactites) and others, their timescales need to be synchronous. Independent time markers, such as Miyake events or the Laschamp excursion, are invaluable for aligning records thousands of years old. Now, we may have a corresponding time marker for millions of years.

Meanwhile, my search for stardust continues, but now keeping an eye out for new 10-million-year-old samples to further pin down the beryllium-10 anomaly. Stay tuned. (*The Conversation*)

(The author is Dominik Koll, Honorary Lecturer, Australian National University)

"Be sure you put your feet in the right place, then stand firm."

—Abraham Lincoln

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 186 SHILLONG, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2025

Stampede as symptom

THE stampede toll at New Delhi Railway Station on Sunday was mounting by the hour. The Railways came up with a swift fire-fighting attempt. Playing with the sentiments of the victims the Railway by quickly authorities announced a financial aid of Rs 10 lakh to the bereaved families and Rs 2.5 lakh to the 'grievously' injured. Instead, what the government should have done instantly was to announce the exit of Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav, under whose tenure worse catastrophes have occurred - the worst being the telescoping of trains in Odisha which killed nearly 300 persons. Vaishnav should have hung up his boots, bearing moral responsibility for what had happened long ago. Prime Minister Modi kept shuffling ministers for the Railways in the last 10 years, making a mess of this principal communications sector. A disaster happened again now, directly under Modi's and Vaishnav's nose in Delhi; and the opposition is justified in seeking the minister's scalp.

It is no secret that the Modi establishment has done precious little to improve the sad plight of India's ailing railways system. True, Modi concentrated mostly on the national highways and roads sector, where a huge commission raj prevailed and which allegedly oiled the BJP's election machinery. The Government failed to move forward in significant ways to reorganize the railway system. What happened in Delhi on Sunday is symptomatic of the chaos that rules this sector. One of Modi's reckless acts was the abandoning of a separate railway budget. The proposals were clumsily integrated with the general Budget, giving little room for the MPs to know what was in store. Modi allegedly wanted to tweak this sector's development to benefit BJP-ruled states and had "much to hide". He started with big promises of Bullet and other high-speed trains. The Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train project is dragging, half done, in the last 10 years though the project was originally conceived by the UPA-II of Manmohan Singh for its completion in five years.

Fact is, the railway sector remains in chaotic conditions, except for limited track length increase and introduction of some new trains. The speed of top-ranking trains remains around 130km per hour - set against the magnetic levitation trains of China that can run at speeds of nearly 500km per hour. Technology in the railway sector keeps changing hugely in the developing world, but not on Modi's watch. Most trains here travel at average speeds of less than 70km per hour. Most old rakes have not been replaced and tracks not strengthened. While Modi claimed to stress on safety when he started in 2014, several major accidents took place in recent times. Catering services on most trains are in a hopeless state. Serving good food on a select few trains like Rajdhani had been there in the past too. Even name-boards of stations across platforms are mostly missing; and some are placed at foolish elevations. Fact is, the Railway system is being rubbished by successive governments.

The ADC Election Debate: Missing the Woods for the Trees

By H H Mohrmen

It is no surprise that debates on social media and election platforms revolve around Article 371 rather than important governance issues, as the intention is to mislead people. There has been no debate on the failure of the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), and unsurprisingly, there is no discussion on ways to improve their functions and performance. Everyone is engaged in rhetoric, but no one has practical suggestions to take the councils forward. No one has taken the time to identify the gaps and shortcomings in the ADCs' functions and suggest ways to address them. Sadly, the public also falls for it and dances to the tune of political parties and politicians.

Article 371: Just Election Propaganda

Article 371 serves as a cloak to cover the new party's lack of understanding of ADCs and its unwillingness to accept that demanding Article 371 is as futile as a baby crying for the moon. The subject is good for academic discussions in seminars and workshops but seems difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. The people of the state already have a long list of unmet demands from the Central government. These include the implementation of the Inner Line Permit, the inclusion of the Khasi language under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, the resolution of the Assam-Meghalaya border dispute, and land for the rehabilitation of residents of Them Meteor, to name a few. All these demands remain unfulfilled, and only time will tell if Delhi will pay heed to the people's demands. Now, like a paper balloon—a popular craft among the people—the VPP is floating another hollow promise in the Khasi-Jaintia political landscape. Notably, this issue was not even debated in the Garo region, so how can one expect it to gain traction when there is no unanimity even among the three ADCs of the state?

The Function of Traditional Heads

Village administration is also under the jurisdiction of the District Councils, yet there is no debate on how to improve it. How will the ADCs formulate policies to help Dorbar Shnong implement various state and central schemes? The development of villages, in particular,

and rural areas, in general, depends on how effectively the traditional heads function. Yet, the role of the headman and the Dorbar Shnong has never been a popular topic of discussion in the different district councils.

Even after more than 50 years since the state's establishment, except for the JHADC, the other two ADCs have yet to enact any laws defining the powers and functions of traditional heads, including the Syiem. It took a wake-up call from the High Court for the JHADC to enact the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Establishment of Eleka and Village and Election and Appointment, Powers, Functions, and Jurisdiction of Dalloi/Sirdar, and Waheh Shnong) Act, 2015, which was passed on June 3, 2015, and received the Governor's assent on December 23, 2015.

Now, all headmen in the district operate only after receiving a Sanad from the Dalloi of their respective Elekas. In Jowai, where the Dalloi is proactive, many villages conduct elections to elect their headmen.

Another major challenge hampering the Rangbah Shnongs or the Waheh Chnong's function is that they work pro bono. If there are complaints about village administration, the ADCs should be held accountable because they have failed to empower the different offices of the traditional heads. In Jaintia Hills, although the Act specifies the powers and functions of the Waheh Chnong, there is a need for a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for traditional heads. More importantly, do we even have a Job Description for the MDCs? Unfortunately, while the JHADC has an operational law for traditional heads under its jurisdiction, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council Village Administration Bill remains on the back burner.

Empowering Women and Differently-abled People

Despite being a matrilineal state, the ADCs have done precious little to empower women. Credit goes to the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) for empowering women in the state, where by tradition, females are believed to be better off than their counterparts in other parts of the country.

Anyone working in rural communities can attest that the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement has indeed uplifted women.

Another neglected section of the population is the differently-abled. They continue to be denied their rights because neither the community nor the village head assists them in obtaining their disability certificates, which they are entitled to. They are entitled to a special job card, CM Care Fund, and other benefits, but who is there to help them when even the village employment secretaries are unaware of their rights?

Rivers: ADCs' Rights without Responsibility

There have been complaints about the lack of care and protection for rivers in the state, which continue to be polluted by residential waste and mining activities. Since rivers fall under the ADCs' jurisdiction, they should be held responsible for this failure. Yet, there is no debate on how MDCs plan to tackle the issue. Not only the Wahumkhrak and Myntdu but many other rivers in the state are on the verge of becoming open drains, yet none see this as an issue that needs serious attention.

Despite ADC rules prohibiting construction near rivers—reinforced by High Court rulings—people continue to build permanent structures along riverbanks. Village headmen, who fall under the District Council's jurisdiction, violate these rules and court orders. The Executive Committee of the ADCs should be held accountable if the headman, who is part of the traditional governing system, violates these regulations. It is the EC that has failed to make the headman aware of the rules and the court's orders. Illegal fishing methods, including the use of poison and explosives, are still prevalent, yet the District Councils have done nothing.

Forests under the District Council

Despite a significant portion of the state's forests being under ADC control, there is no debate on how candidates plan to protect and conserve them or curb deforestation.

According to the State of Forest Report, 2017, published by the Forest Survey

of India, Meghalaya's forest and tree cover spans 79.37% (17,803 sq. km), contributing 2.26% of India's total forest cover. However, unlike other states, forests in Meghalaya are largely community- and privately-owned. Only 1,113 sq. km fall under the direct control of the State Forest Department, with the remaining 16,000 sq. km under the three ADCs: Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, and Garo Hills.

Yet, candidates have not proposed concrete measures to protect forest cover or suggested ways to support communities that preserve Law Kyntang, Law Adong, Khloo Langdoh, and Tken forests. None have addressed issues such as deforestation from logging, forest fires, or the destruction caused by charcoal production.

Sources of Revenue for the ADCs

The ADCs have only a few major revenue sources, the primary one being royalty collected from major and minor minerals. However, there is no debate on how candidates plan to improve royalty collection.

Another revenue source is professional tax collected from employees in various sectors. However, not all institutions and offices pay this tax to the ADCs, leading to a huge gap between collected revenues and the number of service-sector entities in the district. Even incumbent MDCs have not addressed revenue leakage or discussed ways to improve trading permit fees for non-tribals and market fees for traditional and modern markets.

Culture and Traditions

The very existence of ADCs is to protect the unique culture and identity of the people. Except for some documentation done by the KHADC, the other ADCs have done little in this regard. As culture evolves and changes over time, we are fast losing the precious heritage inherited from our ancestors. In a world where people talk about artificial intelligence, quantum computing, algorithms, and data science, we need to rethink what protecting our culture and traditions truly means.

Regrettably, election debates and discussions on social media and election platforms have veered off course. Instead of addressing core governance issues, they have focused on distractions—missing the woods for the trees.

Remembering Rani Gaidinliu: Iconic Freedom Fighter on Her Death Anniversary

By Poujabthai Gangmeih

Today, as we commemorate the 32nd Death Anniversary of Rani Gaidinliu, we pay tribute to a fearless freedom fighter, a spiritual leader, and a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression. Born on January 26, 1915, in present-day Longkao (Nungkao) village, Tamenglong, Manipur, Rani Gaidinliu emerged as a beacon of hope for her people at a time when British imperialism ravaged the hills and valleys of North-east India. Her life was a testament to courage, resilience, and an unyielding spirit that challenged the might of the British Empire.

Rani Gaidinliu was born into a world where the British colonial rulers imposed forced labour and heavy taxation on the hill tribes of Manipur. She belonged to the Rongmei tribe, part of the Zeliangrong Naga community, who endured harsh treatment and exploitation under British rule. The British sought to suppress the indigenous culture, traditions, and autonomy of the hill tribes, leaving them in a state of despair. It was in this oppressive environment that Gaidinliu grew

promised to use his influence to secure her release. He published an article in The Hindustan Times on December 18, 1937, describing Gaidinliu as a 'Rani' or 'Queen,' a title that would forever be associated with her name. Nehru made persistent efforts to secure her release, even writing to Lady Nancy Astor, a British Conservative Member of Parliament. However, her freedom was not immediately granted even after India's independence in 1947. It was only after relentless efforts by Nehru and others that she was finally released in 1947.

Nonetheless, her release did not mark the end of her struggles. Her demands for the integration of Naga territories, particularly the Zeliangrong region, and the preservation of her people's cultural identity remained unfulfilled. Disheartened but not defeated, she regrouped her followers and continued her fight, even as she faced opposition from various quarters, including some factions within the Naga community.

"Rani Gaidinliu was born into a world where the British colonial rulers imposed forced labour and heavy taxation on the hill tribes of Manipur. She belonged to the Rongmei tribe, part of the Zeliangrong Naga community, who endured harsh treatment and exploitation under British rule. The British sought to suppress the indigenous culture, traditions, and autonomy of the hill tribes, leaving them in a state of despair. It was in this oppressive environment that Gaidinliu grew up, witnessing the suffering of her people and nurturing a deep desire to fight for their freedom."

up, witnessing the suffering of her people and nurturing a deep desire to fight for their freedom.

At the tender age of 13, Gaidinliu joined the Heraka religious movement led by her cousin, Haiou Jadonang, a respected socio-political and religious reformer among her tribesmen. The movement was not only a spiritual revival for the Zeliangrong people but also a political struggle against British rule, aiming to establish "Makaamy Gwangdih" or "Naga Raj. Jadonang's vision of self-determination and cultural preservation resonated deeply with Gaidinliu. However, the movement faced

brutal suppression by the British, resulting in Jadonang's arrest and subsequent execution on August 29, 1931, leaving the movement leaderless.

Unfazed and undeterred by the loss of her mentor, Gaidinliu took up the mantle of leadership when she was just 16 years old. She reorganized the movement, mobilizing her people to resist the oppression of the colonial rulers. Her charisma and determination inspired thousands to join the struggle. She challenged the British with unwavering resolve, declaring, "We are free people; the white men should not rule over us." Gaidinliu's defiance soon made her a target of the British. In 1932, she was captured after a violent confrontation and sentenced to life imprisonment. Many of her sympathizers were arbitrarily arrested, and heavy fines were imposed on villages that provided her shelter. She was incarcerated in various colonial jails in Guwahati, Shillong, Aizawl, and Tura, where she spent 14 long years in captivity. Despite the unsympathetic conditions, her spirit remained unbroken.

It was during her imprisonment that Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, learned about her struggle while visiting Sylhet. Nehru met her in Shillong Jail in 1937 and was deeply moved by her resilience. Notably, Nehru referred to her as the 'Rani of the Nagas' and

Rani Gaidinliu's contributions to India's freedom struggle and her relentless fight for the rights of her people earned her numerous accolades. She was awarded the Tamrapatra Freedom Fighter Award in 1972, the Padma Bhushan in 1982, the Vivekananda Seva Award in 1983, and the Bhagwan Birsa Munda Puraskar in 1996, among many other recognitions. Her life story became a source of inspiration for generations, symbolizing the power of resistance against injustice, particularly for the tribal communities of the region.

On February 17, 1993, Rani Gaidinliu passed away at her birthplace, leaving behind a legacy of courage and determination. In his condolence message, then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao stated, "Rani Gaidinliu was one of the most prominent freedom fighters of India. Her services to the people of the Northeast will be long remembered." Many other dignitaries also paid heartfelt tributes in recognition of her contributions. Shri T.C.K. Lotha, the then Chief Secretary of Nagaland, remarked, "Even in her old age, Rani Gaidinliu worked ceaselessly for the downtrodden tribal people, and she has made a great impact on the history of the Nagas. Her bravery and courage will be remembered."

Her life reminds us of the sacrifices made by countless unsung heroes in the fight for freedom and justice. As we remember her on this day, let us honour her memory by upholding the values she stood for: freedom, equality, and the preservation of cultural identity. Rani Gaidinliu was not just a queen in title but in spirit—a warrior who fought tirelessly for her people and her land. Her story is a poignant reminder that the struggle for justice is often long and arduous, but the flame of resistance, once lit, can never be extinguished.

(The author is a Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Law, NEHU)

Letters to the Editor

Brouhaha about heritage conservation at the cost of education

Editor,
The recent demolition of the Don Bosco Technical School building has ignited a contentious debate. As I reflect on this issue, I am compelled to express my concerns and pose poignant questions.

The edifice, erected in 1949, which serves as the LP section of St. Anthony's School Shillong as on date has contributed substantially to the state's education sector. The first batch of students commenced classes in 1952, marking the inception of a legacy that has shaped numerous lives. At the time of demolition, the building stood at 72 years old.

Regrettably, the structure's wear and tear had raised anxieties about the safety of students. Parents had vociferously expressed their concerns to the management, prompting the need for a new, state-of-the-art facility. The management's decision to demolish the old building was driven by an unwavering commitment to provide a better learning environment, replete with modern facilities and expansive classrooms.

While some have advocated for the building's

designation as a heritage site, I am compelled to inquire: Does the building genuinely meet the criteria for heritage status under the Meghalaya Heritage Act, 2012? The Act stipulates that heritage buildings are those that necessitate conservation or preservation for historical, architectural, artistic, or cultural purposes.

I pose a poignant question to those who champion the cause of heritage status: Are the interests of a select few being prioritized over the safety, security, and educational well-being of the students? Is it prudent to compromise the learning environment and jeopardize the future of these young minds for the sake of preserving a structure that, albeit historic, had become increasingly decrepit?

Furthermore, I am dismayed by the notion that this issue has been framed as a matter of public interest. Whose interests are being served by advocating for the preservation of a building that no longer serves the needs of its primary stakeholders—the students?

Ultimately, I implore those who have been vocal about this issue to consider the human cost of their advocacy. Who will assume responsibility for the students' education and well-being if the school is forced to maintain a structure that is no longer fit for purpose?

As we navigate this complex issue, let us not lose sight of the paramount importance of providing a safe, nurturing, and conducive learning environment for our children.

Yours etc.,
Rupert Lyngdoh,
ex-student,
Via email

Time to get out of victimhood syndrome

Editor,
The editorial "Elections Amplify Victimhood Syndrome" (ST February 15, 2025) is timely and appropriate. When elections amplify a victimhood syndrome, it can have several negative consequences for society and the political landscape. Emphasizing victimhood can deepen societal divisions, creating an "us vs. them" mentality. This can lead to increased hostility between different groups and make finding common ground more challenging. Constantly portraying certain groups as victims can undermine trust in political institutions, the media and other public entities. People may start to believe that the system is inherently biased against them. Politicians may exploit feelings of victimhood to gain support, using emotional appeals rather than focusing on concrete policy solutions. This can lead to

a lack of substantive debate and a focus on grievance politics.

When victimhood narratives dominate, it can prevent constructive dialogue and problem-solving. Instead of working together to address issues, differences may become entrenched in their positions. Leaders who use victimhood narratives to their advantage can gain power by promising to "fight for the oppressed" without offering realistic solutions. This can lead to the rise of populist leaders who may undermine democratic norms and institutions. By framing themselves or their supporters as victims, politicians can deflect criticism and avoid accountability for their actions. This can lead to a lack of transparency and reduced government accountability. Constant exposure to victimhood narratives can affect the mental health of individuals, leading to feelings of helplessness, anger and resentment. To mitigate these effects, it's essential to promote informed and balanced political discourse. Encouraging critical thinking, fact-checking and focusing on policy-based discussions can help create a healthier political environment.

Further, when no one dares to call out lies during an election campaign, several negative consequences can occur. The electorate may make decisions based on false in-

formation leading to voting choices that do not reflect their true interests or values. Trust in the political system and democratic processes can erode if lies are perceived as the norm. Politicians who are not held accountable for their false statements may feel emboldened to continue misleading the public. Policies based on falsehoods can be implemented, potentially causing harm to the public and the economy.

Misinformation can deepen divisions within society, pitting different groups against each other based on false narratives. The political landscape can become more polarised, making it difficult to find common ground and achieve bipartisan solutions. The media's role as a watchdog is undermined if lies are not challenged, leading to questions about journalistic integrity. Public discourse as the quality of information disseminated declines. The foundation of democracy relies on informed and rational debate. When lies go unchallenged, democratic norms and values are weakened. Disillusionment with the political process can lead to voter apathy and lower participation in elections.

To mitigate these issues, it is essential to promote fact-checking, encourage media literacy and hold politicians accountable for their statements through public discourse and legal mecha-

nisms. Engaged citizens and a vigilant media are critical in ensuring the integrity of the democratic process.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

Gratitude to Meghalaya Fire & Emergency Services

Editor,
There was a fire incident at our premises, Lifeline Enterprises, Joavan Towers, G.S.Road, Shillong on February 10, 2025 at around 11.15 am.

We would like to express our gratitude to Meghalaya Fire and Emergency Services for the prompt action taken by them in extinguishing it, and stopping it from spreading further, and thereby limiting the loss for us and our neighbours. We would like to put on record that the Fire personnel reacted in a very professional manner and ensured that minimum damage occurred.

We are eternally grateful to them and their team.

Yours etc.,
Anuj Bawri
Via email

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

"A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life."

— Charles Darwin

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 187 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2025

Women Breaking Barriers

NEWS that laishah Rymbai and her daughter have secured a loan of Rs 20 lakh to grow their business called Eri Weave should encourage more women entrepreneurs to gear up and find novel methods of making a pitch for similar loans. What keeps women-run businesses from growing is also the lack of financial literacy and book-keeping which banks require to be able to understand the business and ensure their loans are secured. The Eri silk has already made a name for itself internationally with local fashion designer, Daniel Syiem showcasing the possibilities that the Ryndia has transitioned much beyond the jainsem and shawl or stole. Eri is also known as peace silk or Ahimsa silk, because it is extracted without harming the silkworms. Unlike conventional silk production, where silkworms are boiled alive, Eri silk allows the worms to emerge naturally before their cocoons are spun into yarn. This makes the Eri silk a product that is not only luxurious but also eco-friendly and ethical. Naturally many fashion and brand conscious people globally are buying this silk produced on a large scale now in Meghalaya with Government assistance

For the Shark Tank audience this was a new thing and it is only natural that they would be interested in funding what they see as a good business proposition. Eri Weave's was the final pitch of the day. Passionate as the mother-daughter duo are about sustainable and ethical fashion, they showcased their unique fabric, highlighting its eco-friendly properties and traditional weaving techniques. Laishah Rymbai sought a loan of Rs 20 lakh for 12% equity. What made their speech so special is their commitment to nurturing indigenous craftsmanship while making silk production more sustainable. Their pitch generated discussions on scalability, market demand, and branding strategies. Laishah Rymbai shared her life story before a live audience telling them how she was married when she was only 20 and was later divorced and had to bring up four daughters on her own. She managed to not only feed and clothe them but also educated them by embracing the Eri weaving trade as a livelihood opportunity. The investors were left shocked when they heard that Rymbai was in a debt trap of Rs 35 lakhs and that was when they decided to fund her business enterprise.

Shark Tank is an Indian franchise of the American show Shark Tank and airs on Sony LIV and Sony Entertainment Television. It features entrepreneurs making business presentations to a panel of investors or sharks, who decide whether to invest in their company. Eri Weave was able to get investors Anupam Mittal and Namita Thapar to invest in what is a first for any enterprise from Meghalaya. Laishah Rymbai was incubated by PRIME Meghalaya in March 2022 and Eri Weave is one of the top 50 entrepreneurs of the PRIME Cohort 2021-2022. This goes to show how hand-holding can help local entrepreneurs to scale to new heights.

Is nuclear family the reason for abandoning matrilineal customs?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The upcoming Autonomous District Council elections provide an excellent opportunity to strengthen the matrilineal customs. These institutions protect and strengthen the customary laws of the indigenous communities. Since Khasis are a matrilineal community, the principal aim of KHADC and JHADC is to act as a bulwark against threats to its customs and traditions. But if any individual does not follow the matrilineal traditions, it raises doubts as to whether they are contesting these elections not to protect but to weaken the District Councils, the traditional institutions, i.e., Hima and Raid, and the customary laws of the Khasi community. Some individuals have argued that matrilineal traditions are outdated and advocated for adopting patrilineal customs to modernise. But what is that modernity that they are alluding to?

Many advocates of patrilineal customs argue that the emergence of nuclear families—where the father, rather than the uncle, plays a more important role in providing for the family—should lead to a change, granting the father the right to pass on his surname to his children. There are a couple of assumptions that are embedded in such an argument. First, it assumes that nuclear families are a modern invention and therefore their growing importance causes a reciprocal change. Second, the argument claims that the right to give a surname should correlate with income-earning capacity, which they believe is greater for men than for women. The first one is very easy to refute. There are documentary evidences to prove that nuclear families were a common feature in the Khasi society.

In PRT Gurdon's 1914 book 'The Khasis' there is a description of Khasi family under the marriage section: Amongst the Khasis, after one or two children are born, and if a married couple get on well together, the husband frequently removes his wife and family to a house of his own, and from the time the wife leaves her mother's house she and her husband pool their earnings, which are expended for the support of the family. This is the quintessential example of a nuclear family because the couple moves out of the extended family home and they live independently with their children. Chie Nakane's 1967 book 'Garos and Khasis: A Comparative Study in Matrilineal Systems' reveals the identity of such families. These are families where a woman who is not the heiress, i.e., the youngest daughter or the khatduh branches off after her marriage and lives with her husband. Although she will remain a member of her mother's iing (a descent group comprising

the grandmother, her daughters, and the daughters' children living together under one roof), an independent iing will form from the third generation onwards. This also reveals the origin of the multitude of clans and the custom of teh kur among the Khasi. This process begins when a non-heiress moves, out of her mother's home to start a new iing. Over time, the iing becomes more independent, eventually forming a new kur that remains connected to the original lineage. The clan narratives of the Laloo (Jowai), Pariong (Mawiong), Diengdohbah (Sohra), and Diengdoh Kylla (Nongkhlaw), all trace their ancestry to a common ancestress, Jawchibidi, serve as strong evidence of a process that must have been repeated multiple times over at least in the last 5,000 years (in South Asia) forming numerous kur.

Gurdon wrote his work shortly after the British contacted the Khasis, and Nakane wrote hers shortly after the British departed. Unless we assume the Khasis adopted their matrilineal customs after the British, we must acknowledge that nuclear families have always existed among the Khasi. In fact, they are the very foundation of the present matrilineal clans.

Now, let's address the second argument, which asserts that economic capacity should determine lineage rules—specifically, that people with higher earnings (presumed to be men) should preferentially pass down the lineage. Foremost, if earnings were to determine lineage, various complex situations would arise, making such a framework highly impractical and difficult to manage. Inheritance of ancestral property passes through the youngest daughter or the khatduh in the family, which leaves the other daughters and the sons with no inheritance. If the logic of linking lineage with earnings is being followed, this will create a situation where the khatduh will follow matrilineal customs while the others will adopt patrilineal customs. What happens to the rule of incest or sang, the most crucial factor for the Khasis in determining whom they can marry? What is sang for the khatduh will not be sang for the other members of the family. Maybe for this very reason equitable distribution of property is being suggested by some who advocate a change from matrilineal to patrilineal traditions. But assuming that equitable distribution takes place, will it automatically result in men somehow outperforming the women in terms of their economic capacity simply because they also have a share in the inheritance? I am not sure and

I will use anecdotal evidence to illustrate my point.

In Iewduh one can find many shops being run by women. The men are usually engaged in daily wage or other activities, which would not bring a comparable income like the women who are manning those shops. The street vendors selling their wares in different parts of the city are also mostly women. Having worked with them for many years I know that the earnings from sitting on the footpath are their main source of income for the family. Since women have traditionally been highly active in the local economy, many times their earnings will exceed those of their husbands. I have friends (men) whose earnings are lower compared to their wives. And this is not because of the women's sole proprietorship of the ancestral property. These women have jobs that are much higher paying than their husbands'. So, to maintain male supremacy, women must be prevented from participating in economic activities. If not, there will be occasions where women will earn more than men, which will violate the principle that lineage should follow from men because they earn more than women. Or should families where men earn more, follow patrilineal customs and where women earn more follow matrilineal customs? Since nuclear families are supposedly becoming more prevalent, it is highly likely that, in such a case, families of the same lineage will follow different lineage rules. What happens if the earnings of men and women are equal? Should lineage be determined by the toss of a coin then? This is turning into a highly confusing situation.

There's another situation that will further complicate the situation. Recently there was a news report which revealed that 15% of the children in Meghalaya grow up in fatherless homes, which is higher than the national average of 13.8% or approximately 14%. This is similar to the figures arrived at in 2022 by the Meghalaya State Commission for Women (MSCW). What is most surprising is that the national average at that point was 7% as reported by a UN agency. In just over a decade, the national average has doubled while the figures for Meghalaya have remained the same. That's a highly remarkable jump. Assuming for the time being that the figures are correct, the fact that Meghalaya's figure for fatherless children is only 1% less than the national average suggests that either some states have similar figures or a few states have significantly higher percentages of fatherless children, pulling the average up. Therefore, Meghalaya

may not be an outlier. Furthermore, data from the Pew Research Center (a respected Washington, D.C. research group) has already shown that some Christian-dominated, patrilineal countries have higher rates than Meghalaya. So, this high percentage of fatherless children is most probably because of introducing patriarchal Christian values into a matrilineal Khasi society. But coming back to the present discussion, what happens to such fatherless households? Since the mother is the sole bread earner of the family, should such families follow matrilineal customs then? Patrilineal customs will be observed as long as the husband is alive or present; however, in the event of his death or divorce, matrilineal customs will take effect. It's getting highly confusing.

I hope the argument to change to patrilineal customs is not a religious one, i.e., a change to a Christian family where the head is the father. Religion is a personal choice, but should we permit a foreign religion to destroy traditional Khasi values—values older than Christianity—especially since members of indigenous faiths remain in the community? Is this not akin to Christian fundamentalism, reminiscent of the killings and destruction of indigenous cultures worldwide during the colonial era? I thought there was now a consensus that this was a dark period in human history. Are we going backwards then?

Having looked at the arguments of the pro-patrilineal groups, I can say that they are highly childish and display a lack of knowledge and understanding of the history and culture of the Khasi community. I cannot understand how anyone can take such childish demands seriously and imagine that flimsy arguments will dismantle these time-tested customs, thousands of years old. Therefore, once the District Council elections end, we should demand that whoever wins must strengthen matrilineal traditions instead of weakening them. I have some suggestions which I will share after the elections. For the time being, one thing which I would like to ask readers to reflect on the fact that Article 371 and the Sixth Schedule are designed to safeguard customary traditions and institutions. Since the Khasi have traditionally followed a matrilineal system, a shift to patrilineality would mean that these traditions are no longer customary, and institutions would undergo modernization. In such a scenario, would Article 371 or the Sixth Schedule still be applicable?

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

Donald Trump's 'America first' has Modi's India a distant second by far Joint statement sounds like an invoice for defence purchases by Delhi

By K Raveendran

The Indo-US joint declaration presents a striking imbalance, appearing more as a dictated statement than a mutually crafted agreement. The document is overwhelmingly skewed in favour of the United States, particularly in the domain of defence procurement, where it reads less like a diplomatic understanding and more like a sales pitch for American military hardware. While broader themes of cooperation are vaguely touched upon, they remain rhetorical flourishes rather than concrete commitments, exposing the disparity in negotiating leverage between the two nations. It is also significant that the joint statement has coincided with Trump's retaliatory tariff, with India included.

Defence cooperation has long been a critical aspect of Indo-US relations, but this declaration reduces it to a transactional exchange that primarily benefits the US military-industrial complex. While cooperation in defence technology is framed as a strategic necessity, the reality is that India remains heavily reliant on foreign imports, and the US stands to profit immensely from this dependency. The terms and conditions of the defence agreements are often obscured by diplomatic language, but the underlying reality remains the same: India is poised to spend billions on American weaponry while achieving little in terms of technology transfer or self-reliance. This is particularly problematic given India's long-standing ambition of bolstering indigenous defence production under initiatives like 'Make in India'. Instead of fostering genuine technological collaboration, the Indo-US defence partnership, as outlined in this declaration, reinforces a buyer-seller dynamic where India is expected to absorb American products without reaping long-term strategic benefits.

Beyond defence, trade is positioned as a key pillar of the Indo-US relationship, but even here, the framework appears skewed in Washington's favour. The declaration heralds the ambitious 'Mission 500', which envisions a bilateral trade volume of \$500 billion by 2030. However, it remains unclear how much of this trade will be to India's advantage. Trade agreements in the past have consistently tilted toward benefiting American industries, with India facing regulatory barriers, tariffs, and restrictions on exports. The structural inequities in the current trade dynamics suggest that, despite the grand rhetoric, the actual benefits for India could be limited.

A closer examination of Indo-US trade relations reveals a pattern where India often makes concessions while the US capitalizes on market access. India has historically faced challenges in exporting goods like pharmaceuticals, textiles, and agricultural products to the US due to stringent regulations, while American corporations enjoy relatively easier entry into the Indian market. The removal of India from the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) programme under the Trump administration further underscored the fragile nature of the trade relationship, highlighting how trade agreements can be weaponised to extract greater concessions from India. If Mission 500 follows this trajectory, it is likely that American companies will strengthen their foothold in India without ensuring reciprocal benefits for Indian enterprises.

The imbalance in the Indo-US relationship is also reflected in the personal diplomacy between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump.

While the optics of their friendship—exemplified by the 'Howdy Modi' and 'Namaste Trump' events—were widely publicized, they did not translate into substantial gains for India. The grand displays of camaraderie and mutual admiration may have bolstered Modi's image on the global stage, but they did little to generate tangible benefits for the Indian economy or its citizens. Instead, these interactions provided Trump with a platform to promote his 'America First' agenda, securing defence deals and economic advantages for the US while giving India little more than symbolic gestures in return.

For the average Indian, the Indo-US relationship, as shaped by this declaration, appears distant and disconnected from everyday concerns. While political elites and business circles may find avenues for collaboration, the broader population sees little impact on employment, economic mobility, or technological advancements. If anything, increased defence spending on American imports could divert resources away from crucial sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The absence of clear benefits for ordinary Indians raises fundamental questions about the priorities driving India's foreign policy decisions.

A key concern is whether India's strategic autonomy is being compromised in its eagerness to deepen ties with the US. While strong bilateral relationships are essential for global diplomacy, they should be built on principles of mutual respect and benefit. The current trajectory suggests that India is making significant commitments without securing corresponding assurances from the US. This is evident not only in defence and trade but also in areas like technology collaboration, where American firms remain reluctant to share critical knowledge with Indian counterparts. If this pattern continues, India risks becoming overly dependent on the US in key sectors, which could limit its ability to chart an independent course in global affairs.

Furthermore, the geopolitical implications of this relationship cannot be ignored. The US sees India as a crucial player in its Indo-Pacific strategy, primarily as a counterbalance to China. While India does have its own strategic interests in countering China's influence, aligning too closely with the US could constrain its flexibility in dealing with regional complexities. India has traditionally pursued a non-aligned foreign policy, maintaining strategic partnerships with multiple global powers. However, the growing asymmetry in Indo-US relations, as reflected in this declaration, raises concerns about whether India is being subtly drawn into an American-led security framework that may not always align with its long-term interests.

The economic dimension of Indo-US ties is equally critical. While the US remains one of India's largest trading partners, the terms of engagement must be recalibrated to ensure greater equity. India's aspirations of becoming a global manufacturing hub and a digital powerhouse require sustained investments, technology transfers, and fair market access. A transactional approach—where India primarily serves as a consumer market for American goods—will not serve its long-term economic objectives. For a truly meaningful partnership, both nations must engage in negotiations that prioritize balanced trade, industrial collaboration, and workforce development. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Importance of revisiting our history

Editor,

I have walked past Motphran countless times. It is a part of Shillong's everyday life, standing at the heart of the city, surrounded by chaos—street vendors, honking vehicles, hurried footsteps. Yet, despite its presence, I never once stopped to ask what it stood for. Never once did I wonder about its history. It was just another structure, another landmark. And then, I stumbled upon something that shook me. As the TV screen displayed images of our PM, Modi ji, paying tribute to the Indian soldiers martyred during World War I at Marseille, France, my mother brought up the history of Motphran. I was stunned by what I learned!

Motphran isn't just a mon-

ument—it's a symbol of a past that many of us have either forgotten or never even known. A past tied to foreign lands or rulers, but to our very own people. The name 'Motphran' translates to 'Stone of France', but its origins trace back to the British, who originally called it 'Mot France', or the 'Monument of France.' However, due to local pronunciation challenges, it eventually became known as Motphran.

Motphran was built to honour 67 Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo porters—men who were taken from their homes and sent thousands of miles away to fight a war that was never theirs. They were not trained for war, yet they were forced into its depths, enduring harsh conditions, exhaustion, disease, and the horrors of combat. Many never returned home. And those who did? Their names faded into obscurity. The British, in an attempt to honour them, erected Motphran—"The Stone of France"—and inscribed it

The Forgotten Indigenous Labour Corps : In 1917, when the British needed

manpower to sustain their war efforts in France, they turned to their colonies. Thousands of men from across India were recruited into the Labour Corps, including the 67 Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo porters from Meghalaya. These men left their villages—many, perhaps, thinking they were heading toward better prospects—only to be thrown into the brutality of war.

Imagine being taken from the green, rolling hills of Meghalaya and placed in the frozen trenches of France. The biting cold, relentless gunfire, and the stench of death in the air. These men were not trained for war, yet they were forced into its depths, enduring harsh conditions, exhaustion, disease, and the horrors of combat. Many never returned home. And those who did? Their names faded into obscurity. The British, in an attempt to honour them, erected Motphran—"The Stone of France"—and inscribed it

with words from Horace: "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." Translated, it means "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

Garo Labour Corps Day: A Step Towards Remembrance : Motphran is not the only forgotten chapter of our past. Every year, on 16th July, Meghalaya observes Garo Labour Corps Day—a day dedicated to honouring the 69th Garo Labour Corps, men who, like the 67 porters of Motphran, were sent to fight in a war they never chose.

This day, declared a local holiday, marks the safe arrival of the Garo Labour Corps recruits who survived the war. As a mark of respect, dignitaries lay floral wreaths on the Cenotaph at Babupara, Tura, accompanied by a gun salute and prayers in honour of those who never made it back home.

This annual observance is a powerful reminder that these men, though forgotten by history books, are still

honoured in spirit. But is this enough? If we can remember the Garo Labour Corps, why do we continue to walk past Motphran without a second glance?

More Than Just a Forgotten War Story : Motphran's story is more than just an old war memory. It is about the erasure of indigenous contributions to global history. When we talk about World War I, we hear of European battles, British soldiers, and the horrors of the trenches. But where are the stories of the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo men who were there? Where are their names in history books?

What Happens Now? Maybe next time we pass by Motphran, we will remember the 67 Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo porters who walked into war, unarmed, uncertain, and unprepared, yet who gave everything. Maybe we will stop, if only for a second, and honour them—not just as nameless figures in history, but as men

who lived, suffered, and mattered.

Also highlighting forgotten less talked, Ka Phan Nonglait hailing from the Rymmai village, which falls under Hima Nongkhaw. She is the first woman freedom fighter from the Khasi Hills. Born in 1799, little is known or even recorded about the life of Ka Phan Nonglait. Ministry of Culture has recognized Meghalaya's most prominent female freedom warrior—'Ka Phan Nonglait' as "unsung hero" during 'Amrit Samagam' held at New Delhi in 2022.

Maybe it is time we start remembering.

Yours etc,
Bahunlang Pde,
Via email

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

"Pride makes us artificial and
humility makes us real."

— Thomas Merton

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 188 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2025

Manipulated CEC selection

AN avoidable row has been created over the appointment of the new Chief Election Commissioner – adding to the fears of manipulations of this august office by the Modi government. In the first place, propriety demanded that the government wait for a day or two more in view of the Supreme Court fixing a hearing on the selection process for February 19 -- a day before the end of tenure of CEC Rajiv Kumar. While admitting that it was in the order of things to have selected a new CEC before the exit of the incumbent, the central government's decision could be viewed as an affront to the chief judicial authority. That the apex court decided to urgently hear the case was proof that there was merit in the submissions. The affront did not stop there. In a surprising move, the government has removed the Chief Justice of India from the selection panel. The presence of CJI was a reassurance so far that the selection process is fair and based on merit.

While it is true that Opposition Leader Rahul Gandhi is a part of the panel, its composition now heavily weighs in favour of the government. Apart from the Prime Minister, the home minister and law minister are its members, apart from the opposition leader. Rahul Gandhi, on his part, posted a dissenting note and objected to the exclusion of the CJI from the panel. That apart, how the apex court would view this affront and alleged attempt at miscarriage of justice remains to be seen. The case itself was for a widening of the selection panel so as to balance interests and avoid selection of a governmental puppet. While the lot fell on senior bureaucrat Gyanesh Kumar, the row is bound to gain more steam. The Opposition today carries more strength in Parliament than in the past. On the other hand, Modi is running a government not on his own strength, but being at the mercy of two regional parties – the JDU and Telugu Desam.

With suspected attempts at manipulating the CEC selection process, a stronger shadow of suspicion will be cast on future elections. The recent assembly elections in Haryana, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh had produced surprising verdicts. Even a political veteran like Sharad Pawar had raised suspicion of foul play through EVMs. The then CEC had vehemently denied such allegations. Modi obviously does not carry with him the trust that the nation had reposed in him in previous years, as was evident from his failure to win a majority in the 2024 parliament polls. His actions would be subjected to closer scrutiny now – a time when he has obliquely stated that he does not intend a retirement too soon. He's welcome to carry on and on, but what's important is, he must not attempt to sabotage the systems.

Autonomous District Council Elections 2025 In East Meghalaya

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

In a matter of days the Hynniewtrep people (although the rule pertaining to the voting right of non-indigenous permanent residents has not been abolished) will elect the members to the two Autonomous District Councils in the State. The underlying principle of the Sixth Schedule is to provide self governance to the indigenous community so as to empower them to protect their culture and identity. It is ironic that in the Eastern part of Meghalaya, two District Councils, namely, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC), were created for one Hynniewtrep Community. These two Autonomous District Councils exist for self-rule and to cause legislations to protect, preserve and enhance the growth of Hynniewtrep Community.

The Power of One Vote: The core principle of democracy rests on the power of people. Each vote represents an expression of the will of the electorate. Via elections this will is translated into governance and the Autonomous District Councils elections 2025 in East Meghalaya are no exception and each and every vote is important. The votes cast by citizens in elections represent the cornerstone of legitimacy and hold immense power. However, the extent to which this power is respected and utilized is a critical question, as elected representatives, in too many instances, fail to uphold the sanctity of the mandate entrusted to them.

History is teaching us that post-elections, the promises of candidates often ring hollow. The vows to establish corruption-free administration, enact laws that prioritize the well-being of the populace, ensure justice and fairness in governance, and foster equality and opportunity for all, are frequently abandoned. This betrayal of public trust underscores the enduring importance of each individual vote.

In the context of the ensuing elections to the Autonomous District Councils one must take an informed decision before electing the members of the Councils. Also, one must be guided by principles and ideology which he/she believes in. Unfortunately, neither the candidates nor the political parties contesting the District Councils elections 2025 offer clear information on issues or ideologies to help us make an informed choice. The election campaigns are filled with empty rhetoric and noise. The singular focus seems to be on protection or rather over protection of the "Jaidbynriew" or community, but without explaining against whom, from what, and how this protection will

be achieved. There is also excessive use of the victimhood card, which relegates real issues to the background. In fact, the real issues that matter to the "Jaidbynriew" electorate the most haven't even surfaced during the current campaigns. The rhetoric is too loud and distracting, making it a waste of time. In this article, I will outline a few critical issues that should have been raised, debated, and deliberated during these elections. Sadly, almost every candidate and political party has remained silent on these matters. However, as a voter, these issues will guide me in choosing my representative to the District Council.

The Village Administration Bill: It has been rightly opined by Govind Bhattacharjee that "Meghalaya has a unique administrative structure among all Indian States. The entire State, save a tiny area within the capital of Shillong, is covered by the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution under Article 244 of the Constitution". Under the Sixth Schedule the Autonomous District Councils in Meghalaya are empowered to legislate laws for Village planning/Village administration. As a matter of fact, the need of the hour for the people of Hynniewtrep in particular and State in general is the establishment, through legislation, of a robust and democratically elected grass roots governance in every village across the regions.

The Village Administration Bill 2014 (VAB) which had been tabled and passed by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council is yet to see the light of the day. This bill is significant as it deals with the grass roots governance and should this Bill become an Act it will usher a new beginning for grass roots administration in the entire State. Crucial matters like Village development, primary health care, education, waste management and even traffic management etc can be easily dealt with in a democratic, accountable and transparent manner at the village level in all rural, semi-urban and urban areas.

Nonetheless, the introduction of the bill in 2014 and 2015 has provoked debate as well as controversy in the state with regards to questions of democratization, participation and role of women, participation and role of 'non-indigenous residents', implementation of development schemes, among others. The VAB has been stuck in deadlock with several interested parties and pressure groups giving their opinions, for and against the bill with several modifica-

tions being suggested. The VAB should have been the frontline issue in this election to the Autonomous District Councils and a new impetus be given to move the bill forward taking into consideration the various discussions and debates surrounding it.

Landlessness and Homelessness: The existential crisis present in the "Jaidbynriew" today, is the increasing rise of landlessness and existence of homelessness among the Hynniewtrep community. For an indigenous community land is the Temple and land is intrinsic to the life of the community. But the profit and market driven economy which also revolves around a self-centred attitude to plunder, loot and exploit for one's own interest, the indigenous communities across the Universe are facing the major threat of land alienation in this era of economic liberalization. In India indigenous communities from North East to Central India who are inhabiting the minerals rich regions are facing similar threats and their survival is at stake.

Meghalaya with its unique land holding system which the indigenous people have inherited since time immemorial is also under threat in this neo-liberal era. The rising numbers of landless tribals should be a matter of great concern. How an indigenous Khasi family can become landless? As the cost of living, in terms of spending in education and health care, is exponentially high, large numbers of Khasi families are selling away their paddy fields, lands etc to a few rich tribals in order to meet the basic needs in life. Moreover failed agriculture and underdevelopment in Villages/Blocks/Districts had pushed many rural folks to migrate to Urban centres, especially to Shillong. Land in Meghalaya has become a speculative commodity and there are reports that certain categories of community lands or commons or "Ri raji" have been unscrupulously transformed into "Ri Kynti" or private property. We (Hynniewtrep) need a serious rethinking on the idea of "Jaidbynriew" or love for Community. There is a correlation between poverty, migration, landlessness and cost of living and one has to address them holistically.

Although, Meghalaya has a relatively small number of recorded homeless people, but the existence of homelessness among the indigenous Hynniewtrep community should sound an alarm bells on the Members of traditional institutions like the District Councils, Dorbar Shnong and Dorbar Kur. Lately, Shillong has the

highest numbers of homeless people in the State with 76 of them are housed in the Municipal shelter home. Out of the 76 homeless, 29 belong to the indigenous Hynniewtrep community. The essence of Hynniewtrep society is "ka tip kur tip kha" or to know one's clan relations and the communitarian aspect of Khasi society is to ensure that no member of the clan should become a destitute, let alone becoming homeless. Alas! This is not an issue during the current elections to the Autonomous District Councils.

Administrative Reforms: In order to strengthen the workings of the Sixth Schedule via the Autonomous District Councils, the Secretariat of the Autonomous District Councils in East Meghalaya need a total overhaul. Excepting a question on recruitment policy and advertisement of posts in Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council which was raised during the public debate organized by the Dorbar Shnong Lawjynriew for the candidates of the Nongthymmai Constituency recently, no candidates nor political parties who are in the fray have ever talk about enhancing the capacity of personnels in the Secretariat of Autonomous District Councils and offer concrete suggestions for administrative reforms.

After Statehood and during the formation of the new Executive Committee in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council in May 1972, the new members and Executive Committee as well vowed to bring about a clean governance in the District Council. It is recorded in the proceedings of the House that the members urged upon the new Executive Committee to eradicate and wipe out corruption and evils from the Administration.

Between 1972 and 1974, efforts were made by the Executive Committee of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) to usher in administrative reforms with the aim of strengthening the KHADC's Secretariat by introducing indigenous civil service officers to streamline the administration of the KHADC, thereby promoting transparency and fairness.

However, such attempts to implement the administrative reforms in the KHADC during the period were ultimately unsuccessful. The APHLC-led government in the State then did not support these efforts, which led to the abandonment of the crucial administrative reform initiatives.

Lastly, I abhor religious fanaticism of all hues, and I shall never vote for a candidate or party that abuses God/religion and spirituality for political gains.

Economic Potential of Natural Fibers in Northeast India

By Dr. Anupam Mishra

India's textile heritage is not just an industry; it is an art form, a tradition, and an integral part of the nation's identity. For centuries, the handloom sector has thrived by utilizing natural fibers such as cotton, silk, jute, banana, pineapple, arecanut, flax, hemp, and ramie, which form the cornerstone of sustainable textile production. These fibers are eco-friendly and intricately woven into the cultural, economic, and spiritual fabric of Indian society. Indian textiles are celebrated for their rich variety in texture, color, pattern, and embellishment. Throughout history, textile weaving has played a pivotal role in the social and economic life of Indian communities, carrying cultural knowledge and reflecting the social, economic, and political structures of those communities.

Cultural Significance of Textiles in Northeast India The Northeast region of India, comprising eight states—Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim—boasts a rich textile tradition. Each tribe and community in the region has its unique motifs and designs, which are deeply rooted in their culture and traditions. The region's tribal handicrafts and textiles are not just products; they are expressions of identity, heritage, and community values. These textiles significantly contribute to the socio-economic life of the region, while also serving as symbols of cultural continuity.

Growing Global Market for Natural Fibers The global market for natural fibers has witnessed remarkable growth, valued at \$4.9 billion in 2022 and expected to expand to a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.3% from 2023 to 2032. This surge is driven by the increasing demand for eco-friendly, biodegradable, and sustainable alternatives to synthetic textiles. Natural fibers, including both animal-based fibers (silk, wool, cashmere, mohair, alpaca) and plant-based fibers (cotton, linen, hemp, flax, ramie, sisal, banana), hold vast potential across various industries such as textiles, agriculture, and handicrafts.

Northeast India is particularly well-positioned to promote sustainable natural fibers, including cotton, bamboo, banana, pineapple, ramie, Comilla cotton, jute, and other allied fibers. The economic and environmental advantages of these fibers can drive sustainable development in the region. For example, the region produces over 1.2 million metric tons of pineapple annually, offering an abundant source of leaves for fiber extraction. Similarly, arecanut cultivation yields approximately 600,000 tons annually, providing a sustainable fiber resource from husks. Additionally, ramie, primarily cultivated in Assam and Meghalaya, and Comilla cotton are valuable natural fibers with broad applications. Leveraging these fibers can not only preserve the region's textile heritage but also position Northeast India as a leader in sustainable textile production, contributing to both economic growth and environmental sustainability.

The Northeast's Role in India's Natural Fiber Economy

As India aims for its ambitious \$5 trillion economy, natural fibers, heritage textiles, and indigenous crafts have a critical role to play in this vision. Northeast India, especially Meghalaya, Assam, and Tripura, is rich in fibers such as banana pseudostem, pineapple leaf (PALF), ramie, bamboo, and silk (Eri, Muga, and Mulberry). These fibers hold enormous potential for sustainable economic growth, rural employment, and global exports. The global demand for natural fibers continues to rise, and the market for sustainable materials is projected to grow at a CAGR of 5.5%, reaching \$15 billion by 2030. This growth offers a unique opportunity for Northeast India to emerge as a leading supplier of natural fibers. The region's pineapple industry alone has an export potential of \$50 million annually. Ramie, in particular, stands out as a sustainable alternative to synthetic fibers, with applications in textiles, industrial uses like ropes and geotextiles, and even biodegradable packaging. Banana pseudostem fiber, also known as banana silk, is an eco-friendly and versatile natural fiber gaining popularity as a sustainable alternative to syn-

thetic materials. With Northeast India producing around 30 million tons of bananas annually, banana fibers are in abundant supply. This renewable material is used in textiles, eco-friendly packaging, industrial products, non-woven goods, and even compostable tea bags. It offers several benefits, such as strength, durability, water resistance, and UV protection. The versatility of banana fiber in applications from clothing to automotive components presents significant economic opportunities. By scaling production and exports, Northeast India could generate over \$1 billion in annual revenue, creating employment and enhancing the profitability of banana farming.

Northeast India also holds great potential to capitalize on Pineapple Leaf Fiber (PALF) as a zero-waste textile resource. States like Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Tripura lead the nation in pineapple cultivation, yet the economic potential of the leaves—usually discarded as agricultural waste—remains largely untapped. PALF is in high demand in eco-fashion, blended fabrics, technical textiles, composite materials, and paper production due to its tensile strength, biodegradability, and versatility. Expanding fiber extraction could contribute \$500 million annually to the region's economy, creating thousands of jobs and reducing agricultural waste.

Ramie, a fiber known for its exceptional strength, natural luster, biodegradability, and resistance to microbes, is another key resource for Northeast India. Its cultivation, especially in Assam and Meghalaya, is supported by favorable agroclimatic conditions. Ramie has numerous applications in textiles, furnishings, and industrial uses. By enhancing ramie production and infrastructure, India could boost its natural fiber exports by \$300–400 million annually. This would reduce dependence on synthetic materials while creating new economic opportunities in the region.

Overcoming Challenges

Despite the promising potential, several challenges hinder the growth of the natural fiber industry in Northeast India. These include labor-intensive cultivation and processing methods, inadequate processing facilities, and limited market access. To overcome these barriers, a strategic approach is needed, focusing on capacity building, infrastructure development, and policy support. Government subsidies, incentives, and decentralized processing units can act as catalysts for growth. Collaboration between farmers, artisans, research institutions, and private enterprises will be essential to create an integrated value chain for natural fiber products.

Investment in research and development to enhance fiber extraction and processing techniques can drive innovation and competitiveness in the global market. Promoting sustainable practices and developing high-value products will significantly enhance the market potential of natural fibers. Through concerted efforts, Northeast India can unlock the full potential of its natural fibers, achieving economic empowerment, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation.

Promoting Sustainable Textile Development & Community Empowerment at CAU

The growing global demand for eco-friendly, biodegradable fibers presents significant export and branding opportunities for India. By leveraging the Northeast's rich biodiversity and traditional knowledge, India can position itself as a leader in sustainable fiber production while generating economic growth. The Spinning and Weaving Unit of the Department of Textiles and Apparel Designing at the College of Community Science, Central Agricultural University (Imphal), Tura, Meghalaya, plays a pivotal role in promoting sustainable textile development. Through the extraction and processing of natural fibers like banana, ramie, pineapple, jute, and arecanut, the unit utilizes mechanical decorticators and extractors to process fibers without chemicals. The unit focuses on creating diverse handloom products such as woven textiles, mats, ropes, and other handicrafts, integrating traditional techniques with modern design innovations.

The writer is Vice Chancellor, Central Agricultural University, Imphal, Manipur

Letters to the Editor

A story of grit and resilience

Editor,
The editorial "Women breaking barriers" (ST February 18, 2025) have said it all so well. Ishaah Rymbai's story is truly inspiring! Here's a single mother of four daughters and founder of EriWeave, a sustainable silk brand based in Meghalaya, India focusing on producing high-quality, cruelty-free silk fabrics, while empowering women artisans from remote villages. In 2022, Ishaah was incubated by PRIME Meghalaya, which helped her refine her business model and scale her operations. Her journey and dedication caught the attention of investors on Shark Tank India Season 4, where she secured a Rs 20 Lakh investment for 12% equity from Anupam Mittal and Namita Thapar. This investment will help EriWeave expand its reach and continue uplifting local artisans.

and adaptability in overcoming challenges, which are crucial traits for success in the ever-changing business world. For a teacher turned entrepreneur who had an army rule at home nothing was impossible. One should also be equally grateful to the present Government of Meghalaya for its hand-holding approach in helping budding entrepreneurs through PRIME Meghalaya so that we can have more and more entrepreneurs in the years to come who will immensely contribute to the economic growth of the state through their businesses. While women continue to make significant strides in business, challenges such as gender bias, unequal pay and limited access to capital still exist. However, ongoing efforts to address these issues are paving the way for even greater achievement.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Stop the assault on our green lungs

Editor,
The remaining patch of greenery between the resi-

dence of Chief Secretary and Tapoban bungalow seems to be under severe assault. We can't really call it a forest anymore as the beautiful trees standing there are being systematically cut down making way for another real estate. The approach is quite simple: burn down the base of the remaining trees in the dead of the night so that the trees die by themselves and fall down.

The latest development is the excavation taking place around its eastern edge along the Bishop-Cotton road. Not only is the earth being excavated intruding into the patch of land but trees are being chopped off systematically. And this has been happening right under the nose of some of the most powerful people who could easily stop this carnage. The patch of forest which overlooked Polo Grounds near Orchid hotel has already made way for the office of a Political Party and it will not be long before this plot between the Chief Secretary's residence and Tapoban bungalow meets the same fate. Already most of the green patches which form the lung of the city have disappeared and whatever remains are being systematically removed while the

Forest Dept. looks the other way.

One often wonders as to what role the Forest Dept. plays in the whole episode of disappearing forests in the State of Meghalaya. Habitation seems to be expanding almost every day into the Shillong Peak forest range and it will not be long before a residential area comes up along the Air Force base. Same is true in Mawroh and Mawpat side. Shillong today seems to be in a self-destruction mode and unless some concrete steps are taken to preserve the few remaining green patches and the trees, we are doomed as a city.

My earnest request to the concerned authorities is to fence out this patch between the Chief Secretary's residence and Tapoban and start an afforestation programme there. The same can be done for all the green patches which exist in and around the city. If these green patches are under private ownership, laws can be enacted to bring them under reserved forests. If preserved and protected, the value of such assets will be realised by the future generation or else we will have to stop complaining about the increasing temperature in the city.

Yours etc.,
Emica Nongkynrih
Via email

Appeal for immediate attention to St. Anthony's school infrastructure delay

Editor,
As a concerned parent, I am writing to express my deep concern regarding the significant delay in the construction of the new St. Anthony's LP School building, which has been halted due to an ongoing Public Interest Litigation (PIL). I believe it is crucial to address the urgent need for a new building. The old structure has already been demolished and is no longer fit for use. Its compromised structural integrity has been a longstanding issue, with the building shaking from the vibrations of passing heavy vehicles and even from the simple activity of children running on the veranda. Additionally, the wooden

pillars and floorboards have deteriorated to a point where they pose a serious safety hazard to the students. The delay in the construction of a new building is having a detrimental impact on the quality of education. Many classrooms are overcrowded and the temporary arrangements currently in place are inadequate to accommodate the growing student population. If this situation continues, it will undoubtedly hinder the academic progress of our children, jeopardizing their future prospects. It is imperative that the safety and educational needs of our students are prioritized. Despite any legal hurdles, I urge the authorities to expedite the completion of the new school infrastructure. Our children deserve a safe, supportive and conducive learning environment; and prompt action is essential to secure their well-being and academic success.

Yours etc.,
U Kharkongor
Via email

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

"A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way."

—John C. Maxwell

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 189 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2025

Sound and Fury Ends

THE silent period as demanded by Election Rules started on Wednesday February 19 at 4 PM. However, what happens during this period is a mad fury to reach out to voters by hook and crook and most election commissioners who have now retired have publicly spoken and said that these 48 hours before election are the crucial moments when money changes hands. And candidates with money to burn usually carry the trophy. It's been a month of braggadocio for political party honchos each making claims taller than the other almost to the point of breaching their Constitutional integrity. A senior leader of the NPP during his campaign said he would bulldoze all the impediments to mining, quarrying and all other barriers that would stand in the way of the extractive economy. If that is the brief of a political party what will be the environmental consequences? In this game of one-upmanship up to what extent will the Party/Parties concede to demands from the mining lobby? Or the timber lobby for that matter? Is it going to be a downward final journey to extinction for Meghalaya? For, when the environment dies humans will die with it. But why would politicians whose only quest is to hold power care about the long-term interests of the state and its people.

How many MLAs and MDCs have ever shown any concern for Meghalaya's dying rivers? Has any MDC visited a river in his/her constituency and shown any interest in rejuvenating such rivers which once had swift-flowing, clear waters but are now sluggish drains? How many MDCs have taken up the issue of our balding forests and the continued charcoal production despite the existing ban on this activity which has resulted in even young trees being massacred to keep up the trade? No candidate will champion the need for environmental safeguards because it does not win political points.

In the same vein did any MDC candidate, particularly those contesting from Ri Bhoi area take up the issue of the massive pollution in Byrnihat which has reduced that entire area into a no-sun zone. The sun no longer shines over Byrnihat. But is anyone even remotely anxious about what this does to the health of the residents? Was it a part of culture to pollute the environment? If not, why are the Councillors not saying anything on the issue of industrial pollution? Populism and bluster were in full display and votes were sought on how much the MDCs would climb down from well-established environmental laws. Each candidate is thinking of the here and now; of immediate gains, the future be damned. And from now until 2028 there will be a conspiratorial silence on every issue that directly affects people. The Assembly sessions and ADC meetings will revolve around other peripheral issues largely financial in nature. To expect things to change dramatically after February 24 is a fool's errand.

The Article 371 Debate

Constitutional Safeguards or Political Symbolism?

By Bijoy A. Sangma

The demand for special constitutional provisions under Article 371 for Meghalaya has sparked heated debates in political and academic circles. Proponents argue that such provisions would safeguard tribal rights and protect indigenous land ownership, while opponents warn of unintended consequences, such as economic stagnation and administrative overlap. With several northeastern states, including Nagaland and Mizoram, already enjoying special protections under Article 371A and 371G, Meghalaya's exclusion raises important questions. Would the inclusion of Meghalaya under Article 371 be a step toward greater autonomy, or would it create more governance challenges than it seeks to solve?

The debate is not just political but deeply constitutional. Should Meghalaya follow the path of Nagaland and Mizoram, which enjoy special provisions under Article 371A and 371G? Or should the state strengthen the existing Sixth Schedule to address governance challenges while maintaining its unique status? With the issue being a key topic in recent Autonomous District Council (ADC) elections, the time has come for Meghalaya to decide its future course.

Two Laws, One Goal: Autonomy

The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, introduced in 1949, was designed to protect the rights and governance of indigenous tribal communities in select northeastern states, including Meghalaya. It created ADCs, which exercise legislative, judicial, and executive powers over matters such as land, forests, taxation, and tribal customs. ADCs can make their own laws, ensuring that traditional institutions like Dorbar Shnongs, Nokmas, Dollois continue to function.

On the other hand, Article 371 provides special provisions to various states, each tailored to their historical and political context. For example, Article 371A in Nagaland ensures that no national law concerning land ownership, customary practices, or social traditions applies unless the Nagaland Legislative Assembly consents. Similarly, Article 371G in Mizoram grants the state similar exemptions in matters related to Mizo customary laws and land. These provisions limit the central government's legislative reach over these states and are seen as a stronger guarantee of autonomy.

The 2019 debate: The defeated resolution and its aftermath
In September 2019, a resolution was introduced in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly by the then

Congress MLA Ampareen Lyngdoh, seeking the extension of Article 371 to Meghalaya. The proposal, however, was defeated by voice vote, reflecting a lack of political consensus on the matter. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, in response to the resolution, stated that a government-appointed committee was already examining the issue and that an informed decision should be based on careful study rather than immediate legislative action.

Those supporting the move argue that Meghalaya faces increasing challenges in land ownership, migration, and cultural preservation. The fear that tribal lands could be taken over by outsiders is not unfounded. The prevalent communal land ownership underscores the importance of robust legal frameworks and vigilant monitoring to prevent exploitative land transfers. Strengthening land tenure systems and ensuring accurate, accessible land records are essential steps in protecting the rights and heritage of Meghalaya's indigenous communities. The supporters of Article 371 believe that an additional constitutional safeguard would empower the state legislature to reject any national law that may threaten indigenous rights.

On the other hand, critics argue that Meghalaya already enjoys significant autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, which provides for Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Hills. These councils have the power to regulate land use, impose taxes, and govern local customs and traditions, making additional provisions under Article 371 unnecessary. Former Chief Minister (i/c Law) Dr. Mukul Sangma, opposing the resolution, remarked that "enhancing the existing Sixth Schedule provisions is a more practical approach than creating overlapping legal structures under Article 371."

Despite this setback, the debate resurfaced for the upcoming ADC elections to the Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills by candidates using the Article 371 debate as a campaign issue, with promises of securing greater autonomy if elected. Traditional chiefs, student organizations, and political parties have expressed concerns about the potential dilution of tribal governance, pushing for constitutional changes.

From Oilfields to Urban Clashes: The Challenges of Special Provisions
The experience of states like Nagaland and Mizoram with Article 371 offers valuable lessons for Meghalaya. In Nagaland, despite Article

371A granting extensive autonomy over land and resource ownership, legal disputes between the state and the central government have stalled key economic projects. A prime example is the Nagaland Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulations, 2012, which sought to regulate oil and gas exploration within the state. However, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas challenged the move, arguing that mineral rights fall under Entry 53 of the Union List, leading to a legal deadlock. The Supreme Court, in State of Nagaland v. Union of India (2010), ruled that the state's autonomy under Article 371A does not override national laws governing natural resources.

Mizoram, too, has faced complications under Article 371G. The Mizoram High Court, in Mizoram Tribal Council v. State of Mizoram (2018), ruled that while Article 371G provides autonomy in traditional governance, it cannot override constitutional mandates for modern administration, such as urban municipal governance. This has created conflicts between traditional village councils and municipal bodies, leading to governance inefficiencies.

These examples indicate that while Article 371 provides a sense of security and autonomy, it also introduces legal ambiguities that often lead to economic and administrative delays. Meghalaya must assess whether such complications outweigh the potential benefits.

A Smarter Path: Modernizing Tribal Governance

Several legal experts and political leaders believe that instead of introducing Article 371, Meghalaya should focus on strengthening its existing governance under the Sixth Schedule. This approach would provide the same level of protection as Article 371 while avoiding the complications seen in Nagaland and Mizoram.

1. **Enhancing the Power and Functioning of ADCs:** ADCs in Meghalaya already have legislative and executive authority over land, forests, and tribal governance. However, their effectiveness is often hampered by financial constraints and political interference. Strengthening the financial autonomy of ADCs would ensure that they can function independently without relying on state government funds.

2. **Strengthening Tribal Land Protection Laws:** If land ownership is the primary concern, Meghalaya can amend its existing land laws within the Sixth Schedule to provide stronger legal safeguards against land alien-

ation. This would be more effective than a broad constitutional amendment like Article 371, which could take years to implement and may still face legal challenges.

3. **Modernizing Traditional Institutions:** The Dorbar Shnongs and Nokmas are deeply respected governance bodies, but they need legal recognition and administrative support to function effectively. Instead of introducing parallel structures under Article 371, Meghalaya can work on integrating these traditional systems with modern governance practices, ensuring that tribal communities retain their self-rule while benefiting from state resources and development schemes.

Beyond Article 371: Smarter Solutions: The demand for Article 371 in Meghalaya stems from genuine concerns about protecting tribal identity and land rights. However, history suggests that broad constitutional amendments often create more administrative complexity than solutions. Meghalaya's best path forward is to enhance and modernize the Sixth Schedule, ensuring that autonomy is preserved while allowing for sustainable development. However, based on historical experiences in Nagaland and Mizoram, it is clear that Article 371 does not guarantee absolute autonomy and may introduce administrative challenges.

The debate over Article 371 in Meghalaya is not just about legal provisions; it is about the state's future governance. Will it follow the path of Nagaland and Mizoram, where autonomy has led to legal disputes and economic challenges? Or will it choose to strengthen its existing institutions under the Sixth Schedule, ensuring that traditional governance thrives alongside modern development? Tribal rights, development & governance - can Meghalaya have it all?

The choice is crucial and the debate over Article 371 is far from over, but one thing is clear: real autonomy is not just about constitutional provisions - it is about effective governance, financial empowerment, and a legal framework that works for the people.

(The author is a Lawyer, Former Executive Director (ILC) of the BMS World Mission, United Kingdom, Former National Executive Director (India) of Haggai Institute of Advanced Leadership, and Former Asst. Programme Coordinator of North East Region Community Resources Management Project [IFAD-GOI], and a PhD Scholar in Management studies.)

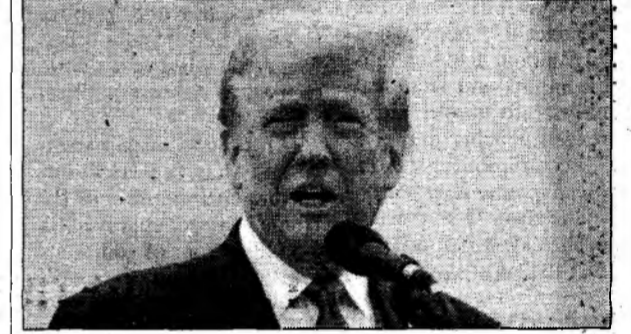
Real Reasons for the Dollar's Dominance

By Ajit Ranade

President Donald Trump's electoral victory last November was decisive and sweeping. He now has majority control over both legislative houses, i.e. the lower house called the Congress or House of Representatives, and the upper house called the Senate. Sometimes both houses together are also misleadingly called the "Congress". He has of course the control of the White House, and this is called a "governing trifecta", which is a sweet spot. He has already exercised his increased influence in the passage of 64 executive orders in barely three weeks of assuming office of the President for the second time. Unlike his first term which began in 2017, he also has a two-thirds majority of the conservative judiciary. This might prove crucial if he tries to deliver on his promise of no birthright citizenship. This cannot be merely done by an executive order, and might require a constitutional amendment, which might in turn be challenged in the Supreme Court. The apex court could come to Trump's aid, although this is not guaranteed in this case of citizenship debate.

Trump's popularity is also supposed to be ten percent higher than what he got from his voters, which means that even some of those who did not vote for him now support

cutting benefits. Yet what is the real source of dollar's hegemonic status? The first is simply that there is no other candidate currency. Neither the pound sterling in terminal decline since the second world war; nor the euro born in 1999, nor the Chinese yuan are anywhere close to the dollar's unmatched supremacy. In terms of global trade, the U.S. share is barely 11 percent. But the U.S. economy makes up one fourth of the global GDP and of course is the largest. President Trump is upset about the trade deficit which is close to 1 trillion dollars. Mirroring that, the Chinese have a trade surplus of 1 trillion dollars, one third of which is with the United States. Many countries including India have a trade surplus with America. So, what happens to all the surplus dollars held by export surplus countries? It is in the form of exchange reserves. A whopping sixty percent of all reserves worldwide are held in dollar assets, i.e. the United States government issued bonds. So that is the real reason for dollar hegemony. It is due to the strong desire of the rest of the world to hold dollars, or dollar assets. This creates a strong demand for U.S. bonds, which reduces the cost of borrowing for



his policies. These policies cover tariff action against trading partners, stricter action against illegal aliens, withdrawing from expensive wars in distant theatres and making NATO allies pay more, and finally reducing the size of the government.

The President has threatened that America will charge reciprocal import tariffs, as a tit for tat strategy. In response India has immediately reduced import duty on American Bourbon whiskey from 150 to 100 percent. The duty on Harley Davidson motorcycles was reduced earlier. India enjoys a trade surplus of about 30 billion dollars with the U.S., and it is this that Donald Trump wants to reduce. The defense purchases of F35 fighters and other combat vehicles are on the cards, partly to assuage U.S. sentiment.

Some of President Trump's wishes seem contradictory. On one hand his desire to reduce the trade deficit and make the dollar cheaper is to increase American exports and jobs. On the other hand, he wants the dollar to remain the strong and dominant currency in the world. He threatened the BRICS nations, of which India is a member, that if they contemplate trading among themselves in non-dollar currencies, then he will impose 100 percent import tariffs on them. You can't simultaneously ask for a weak and a strong dollar. The fact is that the dollar index, measured as DXY, is close to being the highest it has been in the past twenty-five years.

So, what is the real source of the dollar strength and its hegemony? Is it due to President Trump's political support and popularity? Or his enjoying the governance trifecta? Not really. Incidentally, the trifecta is still not good enough because in the upper house, the Senate, the bills need a 60 percent majority to be passed as law. Which Trump does not have at this stage. There are some murmurs from within the Republican Party, which indicate less than enthusiastic support for some of Trump policies, especially on downsizing government and

the U.S. government. This is the enormous privilege enjoyed by the U.S. due to the dominant status of its currency.

To add to the privileges of dominance is another favourable factor, and it is that ninety percent of all foreign exchange transactions worldwide are in dollars. It is the most preferred invoicing currency. Trump has already warned BRICS nations not to transact in non-dollar currencies. The preference for dollar invoicing is due to its inherent stability. And the belief that America will never default on its debt. This is tested from time to time, since the law and constitution does not allow the U.S. government to pile on unlimited debt. It is currently about 33 trillion dollars. But the debt ceiling cannot be breached unless approved by the Congress, which sometimes leads to brinkmanship between the ruling party and the opposition. But invariably the debt ceiling is relaxed, until the new limit has to be relaxed again in a few years.

Whenever there is global turmoil and uncertainty, investors rush to dollar assets, causing outflows from developing countries, and leading to a fall of their currencies. This has happened to India as well. But the real reason is that implicitly the world has faith in the stability of America's financial system, its judiciary in resolving disputes speedily and fairly, its capability of resilience, and the US government's way of not passing too many irrational and isolationist laws and policies. Of course, none of this can be taken for granted. The rise of India and China in the twenty-first century will surely challenge the hegemony of the dollar. India's rise is benign, while China's rise threatens the west. Their evolving bilateral relationship will surely shape world trajectory as well as affect the dollar's dominance. But for now, the dollar is king.

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

Letters to the Editor

Article 371: A contrarian view

Editor,

Reading Erwin K Syiem Sutnga's 'Debate over Article 371 for Meghalaya: Lessons from Nagaland and Mizoram,' my thoughts immediately went to the fact that Article 371 grants negative autonomy (protection from Central laws), as opposed to legislative autonomy. So, the fact that the state cannot legislate or grant license with respect to oil extraction does not lessen the main purpose of Article 371, which is negative autonomy. The issue raised by Mr. Erwin Sutnga, it seems, is that Article 371 does not grant the state of Nagaland autonomy over regulation and development of oil fields due to restriction under entry no. 53 of the Union List. However, while entry no. 53 of the Union List restricts oilfield development to the Centre, entry no. 23 of the State List allows states the power to regulate and develop mineral resources, subject to the limitations of the Union List.

So, while states cannot grant licenses for oil exploration, they can grant licenses for other mining activities

not restricted by the Union List. The benefit and importance of Article 371 cannot be judged by isolated tension with regards to only one subject of the Union List, such as entry no. 53. Entry no. 54 of the Union List also gives the Centre power to regulate mining activities that the states have power to grant licenses under entry no. 23 of the State List. Thus, while the Government of Meghalaya can grant licenses for coal mining for example, it is restricted by such mining regulations imposed by the Centre as per entry no. 54 of the Union List. However, it seems to me that this is not the case in the state of Nagaland. In fact, Article 371A has been a roadblock in the regulation of rat hole mining in the state of Nagaland. But regardless of the legislative limitations of states with respect to the Union List, Article 371 is not deficient in its purpose to grant negative autonomy to the state, thus empowering the State's Legislature in respect of other equally important subjects in the State List and Concurrent List.

Secondly, case laws can indeed serve as lessons. Case in point, when Parliament

created Article 342A, the Judiciary interpreted it to mean that the Centre had taken away the power of states to recognize the Socially & Educationally Backward Classes. This prompted Parliament to reassert the power of states by inserting clause 3. Thus, judicial interpretations and case laws can help us define Article 371 more clearly in the context of our state and the kind of autonomy we envision.

Lastly, tension between the state and the Centre does not equate to tension between the state and the ADCs, as Article 371 does not grant legislative powers.

Yours etc.,
Kitdor H. Blah,
Shillong

Delayed supply of textbooks takes a toll on schools and students

Editor,

Just like last year, parents are once again struggling to find MBOSE textbooks in the market. In fact, all MBOSE publishers should have made all prescribed textbooks available by the second week of January,

marking the beginning of the new academic session for 2025. However, that has not happened.

Whether one believes it or not, some prescribed textbooks have yet to reach booksellers in Shillong and Tura. Titles from publishers such as Goyal Brothers, Amanta Publishing, and Cordova Publications either arrived late or in insufficient quantities, compelling parents to go from one shop to another on a wild goose chase for school books. The situation is further complicated by the fact that publishers in Delhi demand "full advance payment" before dispatching orders, a process that can take two to three weeks.

One bookseller sharing his frustration stated that he transferred an advance payment of approximately ₹1.05 lakh to Eupheus Learning on January 17, yet the books have not arrived. What frustrates booksellers the most is the lack of communication -- whenever they call the Delhi office, there is no response. Instead, the company sends an SMS stating that the books are "under printing." The booksellers are now left wondering if the books will

even be dispatched soon or whether they will be despatched at all. And even if they are, booksellers know it will take another two weeks for them to reach Shillong. This is just one example. Imagine now the plight of other booksellers who have also made advance payments but have either received their books late or not at all.

The non-availability of school textbooks at the beginning of a new session causes tremendous hardship for parents, schools, and, most importantly, students. For urban parents, it's an inconvenience. For those in rural areas, it's an expensive game of luck! Their parents travel long distances to towns, hoping to buy textbooks, only to return empty-handed after spending significant amounts on transportation and other expenses. Indeed they spend on bus fare, taxi fare, snacks at the tea stall -- money spent, books not found!

In light of these difficulties, MBOSE must take urgent measures to tackle this recurring issue. Textbooks should be readily available in the local markets, and no logistical hurdles should stand in the way of education.

On behalf of parents, teachers, and booksellers, I urge the concerned authorities to hold publishers accountable if they fail to empathize with struggling parents. Yes, all publishers must give a solemn assurance that all MBOSE prescribed books reach the market before the second week of January.

But what needs more scrutiny is Meghalaya's dependence on outside publishers for school text books. One can't help but wonder when will Meghalaya and MBOSE finally stop relying on outside publishers for something as essential as schoolbooks? It is high time we explore ways to establish local publishing houses that are "competent" enough to compete with publishers from outside the state. After all, why should the education of Meghalaya's students be held hostage by delays, excuses, and "under printing" messages from Delhi?

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

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

"Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment."

— Jim Rohn

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No: 190 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2025

Rekha in Rajdhani

THE installation of Rekha Gupta as Delhi's chief minister on Thursday reaffirms the capital's destiny to be ruled by women — she being the fourth in the line, after Sushma Swaraj of the BJP, Sheila Dikshit of the Congress and Atishi of the Aam Aadmi Party since 1992. Each of them left their mark, though Sheila Dikshit proved to be smarter among them. The choice fell on Rekha Gupta for several reasons: BJP's principal political rival, the AAP fought the present assembly polls under the leadership of a woman, though the actual fight was waged on behalf of the party by the omnipresent Arvind Kejriwal. Also, a major factor for the win of the BJP this time is seen to be the wholehearted support it got from women voters, who have been promised a monthly dole of Rs 2,500 by the saffron party; the other factor being the support the party got from the government employees and other white collar workforce through the tax concessions that the Modi government announced through the Union Budget.

Clearly, the lot fell on Rekha Gupta also for the reason that she hails from the Vaishya community. The BJP, keen on neutralizing the influence of Arvind Kejriwal, found Gupta as the best bet to drag away the trading community that has all along formed the main bulwark for the AAP. This was also the reason why strong claims of the Brahmins for the CM post were played down by the RSS. The numerically strong Jats got a deputy CM in the form of Parvesh Verma. Rekha Gupta as a three-term councillor, BJP national executive member and vice president of the BJP Mahila Morcha, holds a special clout in the party. Having started her public life as an ABVP student leader from Delhi University, she's well-groomed to handle the key responsibility. Her close ties with the central party leadership and by extension the Modi government should strengthen her hands and be of help to speed up the infra and social sector development of Delhi. As PM Modi rightly claims, Delhi now has a double-engine government to take care of the national capital territory that boasts of a population of 17 million.

While Arvind Kejriwal and his AAP lost the polls, it's too early to write them off. The party that had won some 54 per cent of the votes in the two previous assembly polls ended up this time with 43 per cent votes. Its seat tally fell from 62 in the 70-member assembly in 2015 — and 67 in 2020 polls — to 22 this time. The BJP got only two per cent more votes, 45 per cent, compared to its principal rival this time, though it won 48 seats. In terms of vote share, the difference is narrow. Herein lies an iota of hope for Kejriwal and his party.

What about Article 371 and the Sixth Schedule

By Fabian Lyngdoh

The ongoing debate on the relative statuses and powers of Article 371, and the Sixth Schedule in the Constitution of India is really interesting. Legal experts and political scientists have expressed their opinions from different points of view. However, while standing from another perspective, I feel the need to contribute to the debate to make it more interesting.

Since the text of the Constitution of India is freely available for all to study and understand, let us start with Article 244 (2) which originally concerned the creation of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, to provide for the administration of the Tribal Areas in the State of Assam. That is very clear. So, the Sixth Schedule is a constitutional provision for the autonomous existence of tribal communities within the State of Assam. That is what it originally meant. It is, Tribal autonomy vis-à-vis the State of Assam, and not Tribal autonomy vis-à-vis the Union of India. Hence, the Sixth Schedule provides for a balancing act between the Autonomous District Councils and the State Government. From this derivation, the ADCs in Meghalaya exist vis-à-vis the Government of Meghalaya. That is why we have the District Council Affairs Department in the State. The ADCs in Meghalaya cannot be understood to exist vis-à-vis the Government of India. That is the equation of the Sixth Schedule.

Article 371 is concerned with state-specific special provisions, and Article 371A is a special provision with respect to the State of Nagaland. It provides for the existence of the Tribal State of Nagaland vis-à-vis the Union of India in a special way, and established a balancing act between the Government of Nagaland and the Government of India in ways not existing in other States. Likewise, Article 371G provides for the existence of the Tribal State of Mizoram vis-à-vis the Indian Union, and the special balancing act between the Government of Mizoram and the Government of India. The difference between Article 371A and Article 371G is that, in Nagaland, the Governor has special responsibility with respect to law and order, while it is not so in Mizoram. Sub-section (iv) of Section 1 of Article 371A speaks of ownership and transfer of land and its resources, while Article 371G speaks of the ownership and transfer of land, and the phrase, "and its resources" is not included. Despite the difference, the respective Articles specifically provided for the existence of Nagaland and Mizoram as Tribal States vis-à-vis the Union of India. But there is no specific

constitutional provision for the existence of the State of Meghalaya as a Tribal State vis-à-vis the Union of India, other than the statement in the Assam Re-organisation (Meghalaya) Act, 1969 saying that its territories shall comprise the United Khasi Jaintia Hills District and the Garo Hills District.

Article 371A and Article 371G state that no Act of Parliament shall apply in the State of Nagaland and the State of Mizoram respectively, with regard to religious and social practices, customary laws and procedures, administration of civil and criminal justice, involving decisions according to customary laws, and ownership and transfer of land, (and its resources in Nagaland) unless the legislative assembly of the respective States by a resolution so decides. That is the equation between the legislative assemblies of these States, and the Parliament of India, at least in basic constitutional principle. This indicates that there exists a political relationship between the States of Nagaland and Mizoram with the Union of India, and a political relationship between the Governments of these States and the Government of India.

There is no such equation between the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly and the Parliament of India. Paragraph 12A(b) of the Sixth Schedule states that the President may, with respect to any Act of Parliament, by notification, direct that such Act shall not apply, or shall apply in Meghalaya subject to exceptions and modifications, with retrospective effect. The question is how shall this be done? Certainly, these exceptions and modifications shall be indicated in the executive order, and not included in the Act of Parliament. And who will make the necessary exceptions and modifications through executive order? Certainly, not by the Government of Meghalaya, but by the Central Government (whichever political party is in power). So, the relationship between the States of Nagaland and Mizoram with the Union of India, and the respective governments, is dynamic and active, while the relationship between the State of Meghalaya and the Union of India is passive and static.

Kitdor H Blah has rightly pointed out in his article, "Positive & Negative Autonomy in the Khasi, Jaintia & Garo Hills" (The Shillong Times, February 15, 2025) that Articles 371A and Article 371G established negative autonomy to the States of Nagaland and Mizoram respectively, as they bar the application Central Laws with regard to certain sub-

jects in these State unless accepted by resolutions of their state legislatures. That is a protective privilege. Someone has pointed out that though Articles 371A and Article 371G provide theoretical autonomy to the Tribal States over land and its resources, but in practice, disputes are created between the State Government and the Central Government by stating at the same time that the Sixth Schedule does not lead to such disputes. Of course, the Sixth Schedule would not lead to such disputes with the Union Government because it establishes District Councils which have dynamic and active relationships only with respect to the State Government, but not with the Central Government.

The argument that Articles 371A and 371G are only theoretically sound, but problematic in practical applications, is only a limited legal point of view. These Articles do not provide positive autonomy to the States, as Kitdor H Blah has pointed out. The State Legislatures Nagaland and Mizoram have the powers to make laws on subjects contained in the State List and Concurrent List as any other States, but they have no power to make laws on the basis of Articles 371A and 371G. Nevertheless, through these Articles they have the power to accept or reject the application of Central laws with respect to certain subjects. Such privilege is not given through the Sixth Schedule. For a tribal state to have the privilege to dispute with the Central Government is indicative of dynamic and active autonomy. Being prevailed by the power of the Centre is a different matter. Having the constitutional privilege to be in dispute with the Central Government on the basis of dynamic and active relationship, is better than having no privilege at all by being placed in a passive and static relationship.

The District Councils only have a passive and static relationship with the Central Government. The autonomy of the District Council is only with respect to the State Government, but not with respect to the Central Government. The Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya has power to make laws on 66 subjects in the State List, and 47 subjects in the Concurrent List of the Seventh Schedule. All the subjects that the District Councils are empowered to make laws are also included in the State List and Concurrent List, except that which is relating to the appointment of chiefs and headmen. Perhaps the only law of the District Council that can escape the application of the Paragraph 12A of the Sixth Schedule is that which concerns the

appointment of chiefs and headmen.

There is another disputable argument which attempts to prove that the Sixth Schedule is superior to Article 371, without specifying which provisions of the Article 371, from A to I. It was pointed out that the people of Union Territory of Ladakh demanded the Sixth Schedule but the Central Government offered them Article 371 instead. The people of Ladakh rejected Article 371 and demanded the Sixth Schedule. This, the argument says, proves that the Sixth Schedule is superior from granting autonomy than Article 371. The fact is that the Central Government will not grant the Sixth Schedule because Ladakh is not a District within a State. The Central Government will also not grant Article 371 in the likes of 371A for Nagaland and 371G for Mizoram because Ladakh is not a State but only a Union Territory. Perhaps, the Central Government is contemplating creating a new Article 371J with provisions much different from that of 371A and 371G. If the Central Government had offered Article 371 with the same provisions as Articles 371A and 371G, the people of Ladakh would have gladly accepted.

The District Councils in Meghalaya are different from the District Councils in other States of North East India. District Councils in other States of North East India concern with the affairs of the minority tribal populations, while the District Councils in Meghalaya concern with the majority tribal population in the State. That is a big difference. The State and the autonomous districts are one and the same. Constitutional protection of tribal identity for the people of the State of Meghalaya is contained in the Sixth Schedule, while the Sixth Schedule concerns with the autonomous districts and District Councils, and not with the State and the State Government. This is what brought about the confusion.

The autonomous districts have constitutional tribal protection, while there is no specific provision for the State as a whole. The move to demand Article 371 with provisions like Articles 371A and 371G is for special protection of Meghalaya as a Tribal State with the privilege to bar or accept the application of Central Laws on certain subjects by a resolution of the State Legislative Assembly. The District Councils have no such privilege because their autonomy is only with respect to the State and not with respect to the Union of India. Whether that is granted or not is a different matter.

Celebrating Mother Language Day

By Bianca Nongkynrih

Language, whether spoken or signed, is the thread that weaves through society and culture. On this International Mother Language Day, I want to bring focus to our mother languages, to create a space where we can celebrate them and ensure their survival.

Expanding beyond a means of communication, language offers insights into who we are, our identities, our emotions, our cultures, and much more. The diversity that the state of Meghalaya harbours has led to a thriving multicultural community of individuals who live in harmony with mutual respect for each other's customs, traditions, and languages. As residents of this beautiful state, it is important for us to recognise how important each of our languages and their varieties are, and to play active roles in the protection of these languages enabling them to demonstrate a resilience that can prevent their loss.

Among the seven thousand languages spoken and signed all over the world today, experts believe that over half of them will be lost within the next century, and among these, it is the languages that belong to the Indigenous communities that are most threatened. Various factors contribute to language loss, emerging from a combination of internal and external causes. External causes can include language policies, colonisation, globalisation, etc., while internal causes include how languages are used within the community. One of the most important indicators of language loss is the intergenerational transmission of languages, which refers to the transmission of a language from one generation to the next. Languages begin the process of disappearing when grandparents and grandchildren no longer share a common language for communication. Therefore, to protect our languages, we must ensure that our young ones continue to learn and use them.

Preventing the loss of our languages can begin at home. However, many of us have enabled foreign languages to seep through our walls and enter our kitchens and living rooms, leaving little space for our mother languages. Navigating language use in a multilingual home can be challenging, with one of the easiest solutions being to use a shared language like English. While the multilingual language acquisition discourse is extensive and covers various theories of how children learn languages, in this instance, I focus only on the families who belong to the same language community. Parents and caregivers have a duty to their languages to ensure that they pass on their languages to future generations by speaking to them in their languages and creating a space where they can gain native competence in their languages. While I do not doubt that speaking English can offer opportunities and the ability to connect on a global scale, it is important to ensure that children continue to use their own languages, develop an affinity to these languages, expand their vocabularies, and have a perspective of the world that can be seen through these languages.

By using our languages and passing them on to our young ones, we can prevent the loss of our languages and protect our identities, our culture, our knowledge systems, our history, and all that our languages encompass. As speakers of Indigenous languages, we rarely have the space or the resources

to let our languages prosper outside of the home and the community, but with the constant support we give to our languages we can influence the language policies that are introduced to favour our languages and to champion their survival. This International Mother Language Day I hope to raise awareness of how our languages are deeply rooted in who we are, and while most of us have grown to be comfortable using foreign languages, we must seek a path that enables us to become just as comfortable using our languages beyond casual discourse.

There is no measure for the greatness of a language, but we can ascribe greatness to our languages by continually using them with each other, and most importantly with our young ones, for they will play an important role in their preservation. We must make a conscious effort to use our languages at home, and anytime we are in conversation with a member of the same language community. Maximising language use at every opportunity will be crucial to survival. It is only through continued use that our languages thrive and grow. Speaking languages like English can seem like the easier option, particularly in a multilingual community like ours. However, preventing the endangerment of our languages can bear more fruit for our communities, although it may require more effort. While languages like English offer an instrumentality crucial to opportunity, its use should not be at the expense of the languages that offer a connection to our ancestors, our cultures and our identities. No external force alone can determine the future of a language, and as active members of the community, we play the most influential role in steering the course of our languages' futures. In starting a conversation on the prevention of language loss, it is also important to recognise that languages go through the process of evolution, just as in our societies. We must learn to embrace the evolution that we see in our languages and enable them to flourish along with the changes in modern society while striking a balance that does not leave our languages vulnerable to these changes.

Imagine a future where no one speaks our languages, how then can we describe our customs and traditions in foreign languages that lack the vocabulary that encapsulates the importance of these customs and traditions? Our languages and our cultures are deeply intertwined and the loss of one can be a harbinger for the loss of the other. The use of our languages is therefore imperative to our Indigenous knowledge and belief systems. It is not my intention to reprimand those who speak foreign languages, on this International Mother Language Day, rather I write this article to remind everyone, and myself, to continue to speak our languages, to carry forth a pride that seeps through our communities and shines bright in the languages that we speak, enabling a declaration of survival in a world that seeks to leave the minority forgotten and obsolete.

(The writer graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in English from St. Anthony's College, Shillong and has a Master's Degree in Linguistics from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. She aspires to continue contributing to the field of Linguistic research through research on the Khasi language and its varieties)

Letters to the Editor

Kudos to the Government

Editor,

As a citizen of Meghalaya, I wish to congratulate the NPP-led Government of Meghalaya for some development initiatives that it has implemented so far. I wish to mention three areas in particular. Firstly, there is a satisfactory law and order situation in the state. So far, we have not seen explosive incidents of violence like in the past. The Government has succeeded in maintaining peace and harmony to a great extent. Secondly, under this government we have seen great development in road system. I would like to commend the government for the beautiful and standard roads that have been built and are being built in the state. The Mawpdahg, Ummir and Diengpasoh roads which connect to the Shillong by-pass highway are some examples. Within the city we see better roads

being constructed like the Mawlai road, the Goralane road and so on. The four-lane highway through Upper Shillong is finally seeing the light of day under this government. Thirdly, this government has boosted the tourism sector in the state. Tourist spots have multiplied and the number of tourists footfalls are growing strong from year to year.

The recalibrating of the Cherry Blossom Festival has resulted in the growth of the tourism sector. The Government's financial aid to private sectors for tourism development is a welcome step. However, it is my opinion that road construction should be undertaken to many newly explored tourist spots which remain inaccessible so far. Sohra being such an internationally acclaimed tourist destination, a four-lane highway would enhance its beauty and accessibility. Considering the energy shortage that our state faces, it is my opinion that wind energy should be harnessed as an alterna-

tive source of power. Many parts of our state have huge potential for wind energy. Windmills could be set up in many areas and they could provide abundant energy to the state. Windmills are able to produce more energy than solar panels.

To conclude, I would emphasize that good roads and sufficient energy are the secret to the progress and development of the state. Unfortunately, there are too many voices of criticism against the Government and sad to say, some have a religious tone which is not healthy for the well-being of the state. Of course there are many shortcomings of this or any other government, but that should not prevent anyone from acknowledging the good work that they have done. I wish the CM and his collaborators all the best and I hope and pray that they are able to do more to take our beloved state to great heights and to excel in every field.

Yours etc.,
Barnes Mawrie sdb
Via email

How long will we cower before pressure groups?

Editor,

The pressure group's opposition to railway expansion in Khasi-Jaintia Hills is not just short-sighted but actively harmful to the region's development. Blocking railway connectivity suffocates economic growth, isolates communities, and denies Meghalaya a crucial infrastructure upgrade that could benefit thousands. I question whom they are truly protecting. Upon reviewing numerous online comments under news channel pages, it is evident that the majority of local residents oppose the pressure group's stance against railway expansion in Meghalaya. They appear to be in favour of improved connectivity, yet it seems they refrain from openly expressing their support—

perhaps due to fear?

Clinging to outdated paranoia while the world moves forward. This isn't preservation—it's self-inflicted stagnation, a death grip on progress. They scream "protection" while suffocating opportunity, trapping Meghalaya in an economic chokehold. Their blind defiance is a coward's retreat, a burial of heads in the sand while the future steamrolls ahead. The state deserves growth, jobs, and connectivity—Adapt or be left behind.

The claim that the Centre is "provoking" by introducing railways is illogical. Rail connectivity is not an act of aggression—it's a necessity. Every developed region thrives on strong transportation networks, and denying Meghalaya this progress only perpetuates underdevelopment. The pressure group's insistence on "extreme steps" and violent protests is nothing but obstructionism. In 2017,

their violent protests led to destruction and delays, hurting local businesses and employment opportunities. Now, instead of learning from past mistakes, they double down on outdated rhetoric. The 180-km railway line from Chaparmukh to Jowai is designed to enhance interstate connectivity, not undermine local interests. Improved transport means better trade, job opportunities, and easier access to essential services—something the people of Meghalaya deserve.

It's time to reject fear-mongering and embrace progress. The future of Meghalaya should not be held hostage by an organisation that refuses to evolve.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

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

"Trusting our intuition often saves us from disaster."

— Wilson Schaefer

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 191 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2025

ADC elections done: What next?

ELECTIONS to the two autonomous district councils held on Friday appeared slow and lacklustre. As usual the female queue was long and vibrant. Women came carrying their kids on their backs. Such was their fervour to cast their votes for the candidates of their choice. On Monday February 24, the election results will be out and that would be followed by the formation of the new Executive Council (EC) which is the equivalent of the Cabinet in the State Legislature. The EC is tasked with enormous responsibilities since the Councils are mandated to ensure that forests are not wiped off; that rivers are in a state of health and brimming with life and that minerals, boulders, sand and stones which nature has gifted the people of this region are not parcelled off without a thought for the future. The environment is already very fragile and Meghalaya is a bio-diversity hotspot with some of the rarest of rare birds and the golden langur among others.

What is a matter of grave concern is that the Councils and State Government seem to be encroaching one another's domain but are unable to converge and work in tandem so that use of resources are optimised. The State has effective control on only about 96% of forests which are reserved forests yet have a formidable workforce whereas the Councils with 94% of forests under their watch are hamstrung by scarce financial resources. The State and Union Ministry of Forest and Environment have the necessary funds to deal with conservation and eco-restoration of degraded forests. The new Council will have to learn to leverage on these available resources. Since rivers, water sources and stream are also within the ambit of the Councils it would have proven more effective if the Water Resources Department of the State is able to assist the Councils in the mighty task of reclaiming dying rivers, rejuvenating degraded water sources and also provide the Councils with technical know-how in river management. At present the Councils are owners of the rivers but with no power to enforce no-pollution rules.

The new Council will have to get into better financial management and be accountable for use of public funds - a demerit that has been pointed out by the CAG time and again. Councils must employ people based on merit and by adopting a transparent employment policy. This is the age of technology hence the Council staff dealing with trade licenses must ensure that physical visits to the Council are unnecessary. Technology is meant to reduce corruption and smoothen the flow of services to the people. Another ticklish matter is the administration of Dorbar Shnong, Dorbar Raid and the Syiemship and Sirdarship. Unless there are strict rules of administration within these traditional bodies they will continue to violate the norms of modern governance with each village running according to its own writ. This is unconstitutional and needs to be arrested by the new ECs.

The World Today

By Toki Blah

A new World Order is shaping itself even as this writeup is being written and we are the fortunate (or unfortunate ones, depending on your world view) who are witness to this Global drama unfolding itself all around us. The Old World Order comprised of the West Vs Russia with China thrown in as the new power that had to be reckoned with. The Ukraine war - the result of Russia desperately trying to contain the spread of NATO and the GAZA Palestinian war - a throwback from the throes of a crumbling British Empire trying to shed off its colonial baggage as fast as it could. The whole world riveted itself to the unfolding bloodletting in these two theaters of modern warfare, holding its breath and praying that things should not spill over into a nuclear encounter between East and West. It was the Old World, hoping against mounting odds that MAD does occur and that none would be dumb enough to resort to the nuclear trigger.

Into this tension filled global atmosphere stepped in Donald Trump, a new Kid in the Block, with different ideas and a business man's take on how to conduct diplomacy. No wonder the term 'Transactional President' is a new word in the International political lexicon. As Trumpian America unfolds its plan of action, the Old World sat back in astonished disbelief, at what is being unrolled before its very eyes. Let's try and see what these are and what they have in store, especially for those of us in the backwaters of India, in a region called the North East.

As we speak of the evaporating Old World Order, we cannot but reflect back on what the poet, Lord Alfred Tennyson, had to say on the subject, "The old order changeth yielding place to new and God fulfills himself in may ways lest one good custom should corrupt the world." So what has the New World Order brought in? It has brought in a new realignment in Global politics. As Trump unreeled with astonishing speed his new vision of what things will be, both for the US and for the World; as the new American onslaught of Shock and Awe unfolds itself, we find World leaders scrambling all over themselves trying to make sense of it all. In the US the Democrats are yet to recover from the defeat in the recent Presidential elections and they have yet to make sense

of it all, if indeed there is any sense at all! They have yet to come up with any meaningful counter-measure to defy an aggressive Republican White House. I suspect it would be quite a while before we see them back in action. On the World stage, world leaders are busy trying to read their tarot cards while the more wily ones have managed to make a beeline for the new Mecca - the White House, Washington DC! Within two weeks of the Donald being installed in the White House, three heads of state - Japanese, Israeli and Indian have met him; negotiated with him and more or less signed whatever deals had to be made with the US. The fourth, the King of Jordan, also met Trump but he apparently returned home a more perplexed man, and none the wiser than before the meeting.

Navigating the new political undercurrents of the World ever since the 47th US President was installed, has become more complex and convoluted. Anticipating what next with a 'transactional Trump' is more difficult than with the straight conventional approach of Joe Biden. Nothing can be taken for granted and the ones most in shock and bewildered are the members of NATO and the European Union. They took things for granted; that the American security umbrella would always be there to protect them; that America would still be fixated with safekeeping Europe from a Russian Bear; that NATO would continue to be an American baby. Nothing can be further from the truth. The new US administration sees the Atlantic Ocean more as a stretch of water that separates the American mainland from Europe than one that bonds them together. American interests are no longer determined by the security of Europe. Trump and his administration have set their sights on new areas for American focus and attention. Peace in the Middle East through a partnership with Israel and American type of colonisation of the region is rapidly surfacing. Enforcing American partnership with countries worried over the rise of China and concerned about sea lanes in the Indo Pacific region may well be the future priority for the Americans. No wonder the early invitation to King Abdullah of Jordan and the precedence given to

the PMs of Israel, Japan and India as well as. It left out Europe in the cold and left European leaders in a panic, flapping about like headless chickens!

Now lets see what the deal with India is. In a joint press interview Trump came out with a startling comment when he casually remarked that as far as the US was concerned, it left India to deal with Bangladesh, a country that of late has been giving out plenty of anti India vibes. It showed, as no other way could, that in the new partnership between the US and India, the senior partner, the US, had confidence in its junior partner, India, for the latter to deal with its own backyard in such a manner that poses no threat to the interest of the senior partner. It remains to be seen how India intends to fill in the blank cheque handed over to it vis a vis Bangladesh but this is bound to resound positively in all future Joint ventures into the Indo-Pacific region, the new hub of the Trump administration. In the New World Order, the US no longer sees Russia as a threat. The adversary now is China and Trump is out to cut it to size. Trade is one of the weapons of choice and as 60% of Chinese trade and 80% of its oil imports pass through the Malacca straits, control over this choke point assumes critical significance in any future face-off with China. In this new geopolitical chess game the Americans have not overlooked the importance of the Andaman and Nicobar islands; their choke point potential; to whom they belong and the existence of a major Indian military base there. Seen in this light there is no doubt in my mind that QUAD will be revitalized and strengthened and that port Blair will become a major naval base in the Indian Ocean.

Aside from the above the two countries also came out with the "U.S.-India COM-PACT (Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology) declaration for the 21st Century" - to drive transformative change across key pillars of cooperation. Under this initiative, the two sides committed to a results-driven agenda with initial outcomes this year to demonstrate the level of trust for a mutually beneficial partnership. In defence the deal culminated with the offer of the Javelin anti tank

missile; the Stryker combat vehicle and F35 fighter aircraft to India. Also included in the deal was the resolve of the two countries to expand trade and investment and high level collaboration in agriculture, higher education and technology. In foreign trade there was the ambitious plan for India to reach the 400 billion dollar mark in the next four years. For the North East, what we should be interested in are the issues of collaboration on agriculture, education and technology. We should expect respectable amounts of US investments on these three areas and the NE should be prepared to receive a significant and meaningful percentage of the same. We should prepare now.

The region's strength is its English speaking population and IT related services. Educational tie-ups in these areas are a distinct possibility. We urgently need new technology on improving our upland agricultural system. The US must be having some technology on upland agriculture and we need this technology for our hilly agriculturists. Its high time we address ourselves to the growing global demand for fresh potable drinking water. Within the next 20 years the world's population will double and 55% of this population will need to import fresh drinking water for itself. Where will this water come from? In our region fresh water in the form of monsoon rains comes down in bucketfuls. So far 99% of this rain water goes back to waste. We need a vision on how to harvest this manna from heaven and turn it into an export item and an economic asset for ourselves in the next 20 years.

Israel is the recognized leader in water harvesting and in the maximum usage of water resources. Later this year a large Indian delegation of businessmen, NGOs and community leaders will be heading to Israel for talks on collaboration. Meghalaya should ensure that the delegation should include not just politicians who usually take such visits as holiday jaunts, but someone who can bring back some positive joint ventures or projects from Israel to be included in the delegation. Perhaps in the New World Order collaboration with America and Israel in this field may yield results way beyond our present dreams while slaking a thirsty world at the same time.

Qatar's Emir in Delhi Elevating bilateral ties

By Dr DK Giri

Qatar is popularly known in the Indian political community for its mediatory role in Middle East crises, mainly Israel-Gaza conflict, for contacts with militant Hezbollah and for world economic summits in its capital Doha. Qatar occupies a strategically crucial position in West Asia being a middle power in the Arab world and as a non-NATO ally of the United States. The visit of the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamin bin Hamad Al-Thani is significant for the foregoing reasons as well as for resetting India's bilateral relations. The recent episode of hanging of Indians which was commuted at the behest of Prime Minister Modi rings loud in Indian communities in Qatar and their relations in India.

The Emir was on a two-day visit to India which resulted in elevating bilateral ties to a strategic partnership. Note that Qatar is the fifth GCC country (Gulf Cooperation Council) with which India has signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement. Four countries preceding Qatar are: UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait. Qatar committed to investing 10b USD in India; the current bilateral trade of 14b USD is to be doubled in the next five years. It was discussed that a bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement should be signed in the near future. An FTA - Free Trade Agreement is also in the offing. Also, both countries agreed to expedite negotiations for the India-Qatar Bilateral Investment Treaty.

In addition to signing of Strategic Partnership and discussions on other probable agreements, there were six other deals fixed during this visit. These are: setting up of Joint Ministerial Commissions at the level of Foreign and Commerce Minister; deepening energy partnership through trade and mutual investments; extension of Indian E-visa facility for Qatar nationals; operationalisation of India's UPI in Qatar; India and Qatar to celebrate year of culture and friendship in future, and a revised agreement for avoiding double taxation. There were wide-ranging discussions at various levels in order to enhance cooperation in areas like trade, investment, energy and security. To share some information about Qatar, it has been ruled as a hereditary monarchy held by Thani since Mohammed bin-Thani signed an agreement with colonial Britain in 1868 to recognise Qatar as a separate entity. After Ottoman rule, Qatar became a British protectorate in 1916 and gained independence in 1971. The current Emir of Qatar was the visiting guest on 16-17 February. He holds all powers under the Constitution of Qatar. It has the fourth-highest GDP per capita in the world. It is a high-income economy with the world's third-largest natural gas and oil reserves.

India-Qatar relationship consists of two main elements - Qatar supplying liquefied natural gas to India and the Indian expat community. Indian expats constitute a formidable 27% of Qatar's population. They are a major source of foreign remittances for India. World Bank data suggests that Indian expats in Qatar send around 4.14b USD in remittances to India. Both these elements are facing challenges in the changing geo-political context. Indian expats are not just menial workers but are the backbone of Qatar's robust economy. Qatar is heavily dependent on the Indian workforce. Indian expats are 800,000 plus.

The construction industry which is the predominant sector of Qatar economy is a major employer of Indian blue-collar workers. Qatar's infrastructure projects need labourers, masons, carpenters, plumbers and electricians. These workers come mainly from the Indian community in Qatar. So the mutual dependence - India for gas and Qatar for skilled manpower - is often underplayed in diplomatic niceties. The harsh punishment imposed on Indians has alarmed the expat community in Qatar. Whether they were guilty is a matter of separate discussion. The supply of LNG faces competition from the United States. For various reasons, India is moving closer to the US. It is inclined to import LNG from the United States. Then what happens to Qatar LNG supplies? How will India hedge between Qatar and the US when the former was providing cheaper LNG to India? India should be careful in undermining long-standing mutually beneficial partnership with Qatar. Remember, the recent 20-year LNG deal with Qatar is estimated to have saved India 6b USD. There is an attempt by European countries to buy Qatari gas in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war. Yet, Qatar signs a 20-year agreement with India in recognition of India as an emerging world power as well as a potential market.

The challenges which still persist between India and Qatar include issues related to labour rights, expat welfare and regional tensions. The last one fully occupies Qatar as it is often made to play the interlocutor. Persistent conflict between Israel and Palestine, the instability caused by internal conflicts in Syria, rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional leadership, unrelentingly occupying Qatar. New Delhi could team-up with Qatar to give a hand to the latter in dealing with the regional tensions.

India and Qatar have had a steady relationship. It needs to be deepened. New Delhi should engage more with Qatar in the West Asian security situation. As such, the Indian-Qatar relationship is too crucial for both countries to be taken for granted. The relation should be enhanced by constant nurturing, strategic foresight and a clear understanding of the dramatically changing global geo-politics. In that sense, Emir's visit to India is quite impactful. Qatar should expand its investment in India. Modi should reciprocate by helping the Qatari economy in many other areas where India is strong.

New Delhi cannot cold-shoulder any West Asian country, let alone Qatar. India has a huge Diaspora in the Middle East, in many countries. The Indian economy is bolstered by remittances from the expats. Indians are increasingly getting involved in the growth and development of the West Asian countries which they have embraced as their places of work and stay. Their goodwill from the host countries should be harnessed for improving India's bilateral ties in the Middle East.

New Delhi is not short of diplomatic initiatives and the Prime Minister's personal warmth with leaders of West Asia. As said, Modi's personal intervention precluded a major tragedy when Indian Navy officers and others were given death sentences by the Qatari judiciary. The Foreign Minister Jaishankar's strategic visits to Doha are indicators of New Delhi's deft diplomacy. That should continue in the interest of consolidation of India-Qatar bilateralism.

---INFA
(The writer is Prof. NIS Group of Institutions, Odisha)

Letters to the Editor

Building a safer future

Editor,

For over a century, St Anthony's Junior School has been more than just walls and classrooms - it has been a home to dreams, friendships and bright futures. Generations have walked its halls carrying forward a legacy built on knowledge and care. But as time passes even the strongest structures weaken. The cracks in the walls are not just signs of age; they are reminders that change is inevitable.

The decision to rebuild is not about letting go of history but about protecting the future. No tradition or sentiment is greater than the safety of our children. A new, stronger, more resilient building does not mean forgetting the past. It means honouring the past by ensuring that the next generation has a safe place to learn and grow in.

Change is difficult but a necessary part of life. Let's come together, not in resistance but in hope so that the school we love can stand tall for another one hundred years, shaping even more lives just as it has shaped ours.

Yours etc.,
Cathrine Shabong,
Via email

The Sad Situation of St. Anthony's School

Editor,

The delay in the construction of the building of St. Anthony's L. P. School, Laitumkrah, vexes us. We understand that after due permission had been sought and granted, the construction of the new building was initiated, starting with the demolition of the old building. Then, the notion that the old building could have been tagged 'heritage' stalled the reconstruction. Sheer commonsensical perusal of the Meghalaya Heritage Act, 2012, does not convince one that the building is 'heritage'.

And, here, we do not have even an iota of doubt that the group owning and managing the school had thought in good faith and out of goodwill that it was in the best interests of the young children to construct another building in place of the old one which had run its course and had done its service. We do not have any doubts for we are talking about the group which has rendered inarguably yeoman's service in the field of education - locally, nationally, and internationally. The same group has done a highly commendable part in keeping alive our history. The museum (DB-CIC) in Mawlai is just one humongous testimony to their commitment.

The delay in the construction of the new building is only going to more adversely impact the overall well-being of the young students. We request that a way be paved for the construction to commence, and to ensure that the young ones have the optimum ambience to grow and thrive in.

Yours etc.,
Valerian Pakma
& Boswell Pal
Association of the Past
Pupils of Don Bosco
Via email

Meghalaya's Education System: White Elephant In Need of Reforms

Editor,

I write to express my concerns about the state of education in Meghalaya, a topic that demands immediate attention and action. While the state has made commendable progress in improving literacy rates and expanding access to education, the system remains plagued by systemic issues that hinder its potential to empower the youth and drive socio-economic development.

Meghalaya's literacy rate of 75.48% (2011 Census) is a positive indicator, but it masks the stark disparities between urban and rural areas, as well as gender-based inequalities. Rural regions, particularly in the Garo Hills, continue to lag behind, with girls often facing cultural and economic barriers to education. Literacy, while important, is not enough. The state must focus on functional literacy, critical thinking, and skill development to prepare students for a competitive world.

Having attended the live session on the pre-budget consultation for the financial

year 2025-2026 on Facebook, the statistics and the data presented on our education was a matter of immediate concern. Meghalaya, despite having a lower population than Tripura, has significantly more schools (14,582 vs. 4,929) and teachers (55,160 vs. 36,433). This raises questions about the state's education policies, teacher recruitment strategy, or possibly an over-representation of small-scale institutions. The presence of 206 schools with zero enrolment and 2,269 schools with single-digit enrolment out of a total 14,582 schools highlights a severe inefficiency in resource allocation and management.

The fact that 206 schools have zero students raises serious concerns about wastage of public funds, mismanagement, and lack of accountability in the education sector. Schools with single-digit enrolment (2,269 in total) suggest that either the schools are not meeting student needs or there is an oversupply of institutions without demand-driven planning. Within deficit and ad-hoc schools, 18 have no enrolment, and 1,141 have single-digit enrolment, indicating that even partially government-aided institutions are struggling to attract students. This signals a need for a thorough review of education policies, funding allocation, and rationalisation of schools based on population density and demand.

Despite a massive annual budget allocation of Rs. 1967 crores for school teachers and Rs. 218.68 crores for college faculty, student performance in crucial exams remains alarmingly low. A significant 47% of the school salary

budget is directed toward GIA Private School teachers, while government and SSA teachers receive 35% and 19%, respectively. Similarly, GIA Private Colleges receive a staggering 83% of the college salary budget, with just 13 institutions consuming Rs. 121.66 crores. However, the return on this investment is questionable. Over the last decade, SSLC exam pass rates have fluctuated between 50% and 57%, with 2024 recording a mere 55.80%. This raises concerns about the efficiency of resource allocation, quality of education, and accountability in the system. With such substantial funding, why are students struggling to achieve better results? This pressing issue calls for a critical review of spending effectiveness and academic outcomes. Year after year, an increasing number of schools are failing their students, with 124 institutions recording a 0% pass rate in 2024 alone. Even more shocking, 36 schools have had absolutely no passed students for three consecutive years.

This isn't just an academic failure; it's a systemic collapse. Despite crores of rupees spent on teacher salaries and infrastructure, the outcome remains abysmal. What explains this persistent failure? Lack of accountability? Poor teaching standards? A flawed curriculum? The education sector cannot afford to brush these figures aside. Every failed student represents a future compromised. If drastic reforms aren't implemented, the system will continue to churn out batches of students with shattered aspirations. The authorities must answer: where is the money going, and

why is it not translating into quality education?

The dismal state of Meghalaya's education system is a pressing issue that demands immediate intervention. While the state has made strides in improving literacy, the persistent challenges of poor student outcomes, inefficient resource allocation, and an alarming number of underperforming schools expose deep-rooted systemic flaws. The data speaks for itself - wastage of public funds, schools with negligible or zero enrolment, and stagnating SSLC pass rates despite substantial financial investment. This is not merely a policy failure; it is an educational crisis with long-term socio-economic consequences. Without accountability, transparency, and strategic reforms, Meghalaya risks failing an entire generation of students. The government must prioritise evidence-based policymaking, ensure optimal utilization of resources, and implement a merit-driven approach to improve teaching standards. Education is the foundation of progress. If Meghalaya aspires to empower its youth and compete in a rapidly evolving world, it cannot afford to let another year pass with these glaring inefficiencies. The time for rhetoric is over - concrete action is the need of the hour.

Yours etc.,
Teresa Phawa Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

Why does Earth teem with colours? Research begins to give answers

Picture a primordial Earth: a world of muted browns, greys and greens. Fast forward to today, and Earth teems with a kaleidoscope of colours.

From the stunning feathers of male peacocks to the vivid blooms of flowers, the story of how Earth became colourful is one of evolution. But how and why did this explosion of colour happen? Recent research is giving us clues into this part of Earth's narrative.

The journey towards a colourful world began with the evolution of vision, which initially developed to distinguish light from dark over 600 million years ago.

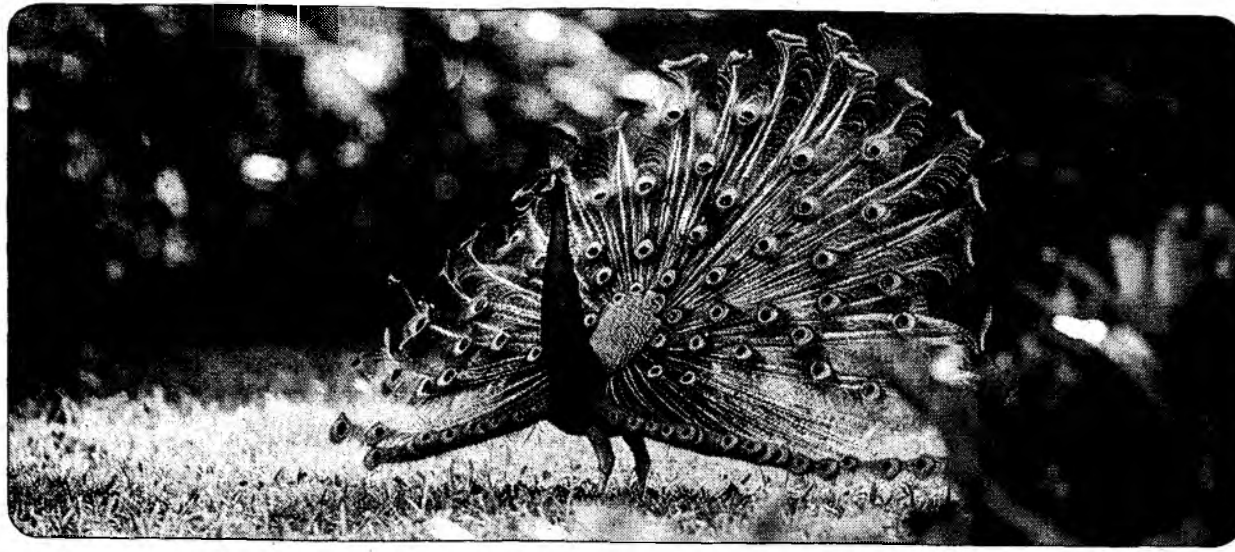
This ability probably arose in early organisms, like single-celled bacteria, enabling them to detect changes in their environment, such as the direction of sunlight. Over time, more sophisticated visual systems evolved and allowed organisms to perceive a broader spectrum of light.

For example, trichromatic vision — the ability to detect three distinct wavelengths such as red, green and blue — originated approximately 500-550 million years ago. This coincided with the "Cambrian explosion" (about 541 million years ago), which marked a rapid diversification of life, including the development of advanced sensory systems like vision.

The first animals with trichromatic vision were arthropods (a group of invertebrates that includes insects, spiders and crustaceans).

Trichromatic vision emerged 420-500 million years ago in vertebrates. This adaptation helped ancient animals to navigate their environments and detect predators or prey in ways that monochromatic vision could not.

Fossil evidence from trilobites, extinct marine arthropods that roamed the seas over 500 million years ago, suggests they had compound eyes. This means eyes with multiple small lenses, each capturing a fraction of the visual field, which combine to form a mosaic image. These eyes could detect multiple wavelengths, providing an evolutionary advantage in dim marine environments by enhancing the animal's visibility and motion detection.



The first burst of conspicuous colour came from plants. Early plants began producing colourful fruits and flowers, such as red, yellow, orange, blue and purple, to attract animals to help plants with seed dispersal and pollination.

Analytical models based on present-day plant variation suggest that colourful fruits, which appeared roughly 300-377 million years ago, co-evolved with seed-dispersing animals, such as early relatives of mammals.

Flowers and their pollinators emerged later, around 140-250 million years ago. These innovations marked a turning point in Earth's palette.

The rise of flowering plants (angiosperms) in the Cretaceous period, over 100 million years ago, brought an explosion of colour, as flowers evolved brighter and more vibrant hues than seeds to attract pollinators like bees, butterflies and birds.

Conspicuous colouration in animals emerged less than 140 million years ago. Before, animals were mostly muted browns and greys. This timeline suggests that colour evolution was not inevitable, shaped instead by ecological and evolutionary factors, which could have led to different outcomes under different circumstances.

Vibrant colours often evolved as a kind of signalling to attract mates, deter predators, or establish dominance.

Sexual selection probably played a strong role in driving these changes.

Dinosaurs provide some of the most striking evidence of early animal colouration. Fossilised melanosomes (pigment-containing cell structures called organelles) in feathered dinosaurs like Anchiornis reveal a vivid red plumage.

These feathers probably served display purposes, signalling fitness to mates or intimidating rivals. Similarly, the fossilised scales of a green and black ten million-year-old snake fossil suggest early use of colour for signalling or camouflage.

The evolution of colour is not always straightforward. Take poison frogs, for instance.

These small amphibians display striking hues of blue, yellow, or red, not to attract mates but to warn predators of their toxicity, a phenomenon known as aposematism.

But some of their close relatives, equally toxic, blend into their environments. So why evolve bright warning signals when camouflage could also deter predators? The answer lies in the local predator community and the cost of producing colour. In regions where predators learn to associate vibrant colours with toxicity, conspicuous coloration is an effective survival strategy. In other contexts, blending in may work.

Unlike many mammals, which

have dichromatic vision and see fewer colours, most primates including humans have trichromatic vision, enabling us to perceive a broader range of hues, including reds.

This probably helped our ancestors locate fruit in forests and likely played a role in social signalling. We see flowers differently from pollinators like bees, which can detect ultraviolet patterns invisible to us, highlighting how colour is tailored to a species' ecological needs.

A world still changing

Earth's palette isn't static. Climate change, habitat loss, and human influence are altering the selective pressures on colouration, potentially reshaping the visual landscape of the future. For example, some fish species exposed to polluted waters are losing their vibrant colours, as toxins disrupt pigment production or visual communication.

As we look to the past, the story of Earth's colours is one of gradual transformation punctuated by bursts of innovation. From the ancient seas where trilobites first saw the world in colour to the dazzling displays of modern birds and flowers, life on Earth has been painting its canvas for over half a billion years.

What will the next chapter of this vibrant story hold? (*The Conversation*)

Weight, menstruation: Are these two linked?

You may have noticed that changes in weight are sometimes accompanied by changes in your period. But what does one really have to do with the other? Maintaining a healthy weight is key to regular menstruation. Here's why — and when to talk to your doctor.

The role of hormones: The menstrual cycle — including when you bleed and ovulate — is regulated by a balance of hormones, particularly oestrogen.

The ovaries are connected to the brain through a hormonal signalling system. This acts as a kind of "chain of command" of hormones controlling the menstrual cycle.

The brain produces a key hormone, called the gonadotropin-releasing hormone, in the hypothalamus. It stimulates the release of other hormones which tell the ovaries to produce oestrogen and release a mature egg (ovulation).

But the release of the gonadotropin-releasing hormone depends on oestrogen levels and how much energy is available to the body. Both of these are closely related to body weight.

Oestrogen is primarily produced in the ovaries, but fat cells also produce oestrogen. This is why weight — and more specifically body fat — can affect menstruation.

Can being underweight affect my period? The body prioritises conserving energy. When reserves are low it stops anything non-essential, such as reproduction. This can happen when you are underweight, or suddenly lose weight. It can also happen to people who undertake intense exercise or have inadequate nutrition.

The stress sends the hypothalamus into survival mode. As a result, the body lowers its production of the hormones important to ovulation, including oestrogen, and stops menstruation. Being chronically underweight means not having enough energy available to support reproduction, which can lead to menstrual irregularities including amenorrhea (no periods at all).

How about being overweight? Higher body fat can elevate oestrogen levels.

When you're overweight your body stores extra energy in fat cells, which produce oestrogen and other

hormones and can cause inflammation in the body. So, if you have a lot of fat cells, your body produces an excess of these hormones. This can affect normal functioning of the uterus lining (endometrium).

Excess oestrogen and inflammation can interfere in the feedback system to the brain and stop ovulation. As a result, you may have irregular or missed periods.

It can also lead to pain (dysmenorrhea) and heavier bleeding (menorrhagia).

Being overweight can sometimes worsen premenstrual syndrome as well. One study found for every 1 kg increase in height (m²) in body mass index (BMI), the risk of premenstrual syndrome went up by 3%. Women with a BMI over 27.5 kg/m² had a much higher risk than those with a BMI under 20 kg/m².

What else might be going on? Sometimes weight changes are linked to hormonal balances that indicate an underlying condition.

For example, people with polycystic ovary syndrome may gain weight or find it hard to lose weight, because they have a hormonal imbalance, including higher levels of testosterone.

The syndrome is also associated with irregular periods and heavy bleeding. So, if you notice these symptoms, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor.

Similarly, weight changes and irregular periods in midlife might signal the start of perimenopause, the period before menopause (when your periods stop altogether).

When should I worry? Small changes in when your period comes or how long it lasts are usually harmless.

Similarly, slight fluctuations in weight won't usually have a significant impact on your period — or the changes may be so subtle you don't notice them.

But regular menstruation is an important marker of female health. Sometimes changes in flow, regularity or the pain you experience can indicate there's something else going on.

If you notice changes and they don't feel right to you, speak to a health care provider. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 23, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon sextile Sun on your solar return chart and this is going to bring good results for you. You would be energetic and raring to go. You will have self-belief in your abilities to achieve wonderful results. You will be entrusted with major responsibility at your workplace and will not disappoint your bosses. Your name and fame will increase. Financially there would be major worries. You will explore new areas of business. And could also enter into a partnership or collaboration. There would be a lot of business related trips that you might undertake. Those who are singles could explore marriage market and get favorable response. Relations with mate will remain perfect. There could be arrival of guests at your home. And your younger sister/brother could get married. This will be a wonderful year overall.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You participate in conversations, seminars, meetings and express yourself more specifically about your views this week. This is an excellent time to make some financial investments and adopt new strategies in financial matters. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation business associates. It's time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Students of Computer Hardware and Engineering achieve better results now. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Your work status may change for the better. There could be a promotion or new job opportunity that enables you to come into the limelight in a positive way. Authority figures, elders, parents, or influential people in your life tend to support and respect you. They are more willing to help you on your road to success. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. The more willing you are to put yourself in the limelight, the more positive the rewards. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities that come your way.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your self-confidence gets a boost and you meet difficult tasks and resolve work related issues confidently. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You would admire and adapt new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. You are able to find creative solutions to problems now. It is good time to organize your workplace and make it more modernized and equipped with good infrastructure. This would help you to get a better perspective to achieve desired goals. Also, circumstances or your own reserve may prevent you from openly declaring or expressing your feelings. Avoid being lazy and laid back as temporary gain or success in business needs to be followed up with hard work and dedication.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This can be a time of achievement, career advancement, and success in business. Work-related travel or the reaching of a wider society is possible during this week. You adopt new styles and spend on luxury items. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance during this week. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself efficiently. You would maintain balance of the head and heart also in professional and personal matters. You turn things around in business dealings in your favor. You are noble and generous in family situations. Monetary transaction brings gains in property related issues. An overseas or long distance journey with includes pilgrimage is on the cards. You maintain a fitness routine and healthy diet program.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your creativity will assist in your output at work and help you undertake new assignments. You may especially enjoy experiencing different cultures and ethnic styles. Your ideals are higher than usual, teaching may be part of the picture, and your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you indicated this week. Students in journalism, law, management and related fields attain success and good results. You might also enjoy analyzing different health or nutrition programs. It's a great time to make improvements to your regular routines.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) Your professional skills wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. Tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people

and get your point across. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards. This time takes some kind of pressure on professional and personal aspects. You may begin to take on more responsibilities on the job. Your job could become rather tedious or boring, or working conditions may be frustrating. You may have to draw some boundaries with friends and the demands of others.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You would be emotional, loving and caring in personal relationships and family situations. You manage to communicate with moody and angry people with a sensitive approach and gentle manner. You would combine your inner and outer strengths to achieve success and happiness. Sometimes you would protest against domination by people at work. Some associations would be competitive in business but you shine and work well in your field of activity. Your hobbies, moments spent with family, all come into focus. Some lifestyle changes made by you begin to show results.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) New associations and beginnings in work areas as some unknown opportunities and changes may come. You would improve your romantic and love life by bringing more sincerity, cooperation and humanity as unusual attractions and dreams could feature this time. You may explore new infrastructure and improve office as this brings more efficiency and continuity on your work. You tend to entertain others with your conversation and your sense of humor. The desire for some form of recognition is going to be fulfilled in this phase. Financial success is stronger than any other time enhanced now. Brisk walk and timely eating would be helpful.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This period brings excellent opportunities for people in show business and related fields. You would work more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. Your personal charm and attractiveness would have a positive effect on your relationships. People see you as a loving and lovable person, and as someone who is aware of their needs and feelings, which can benefit you at this time. Others are willing to help and cooperate with your goals and ambitions. It would be better to go for long term investments and speculations for financial gains.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally. You are bold and adventurous and you cannot tolerate delay that prevents you from behaving exactly you want. How willing you're prepared to experiment and explore new approaches will determine your success this time. You would achieve a lot in business and professional aspects by combining creativity and practicality. You can expect superiors to support you and stand up for you in tough situations at work. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. You will be considerably more proactive, healthy, and focused.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) The planetary configuration brings more stability in relations and professional life. You have a tendency to compromise and adjust and take a soft approach while dealing with people at work and home. You give a new method to communications, projects, learning and self-expression. It's a passionate time, although you are unlikely to display a whole lot of self-discipline. You would work in association with senior colleagues and people in authority and learn many more things at the work place, which boosts your confidence. You use your best talents and co-relate all activities to boost the business and work opportunities. Make changes to your fitness routine and healthy diet program to rejuvenate.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase brings excellent work opportunities for people in teaching, hotel, finance and in communication fields. People in marketing and sales would work hard to meet professional commitments. You would impress people from your communication skills as this brings positive results in matters related to love, family and professional relations. You would express yourself with charm and grace, whether it's through what you say or you write. Your romantic affair would give a big boost of confidence, and personal magnetism runs high to be appreciated and admired. Spending time in solitude among natural surroundings will be therapeutic.

Routine x-rays to diagnose knee arthritis likely to spell trouble

Osteoarthritis is a leading cause of chronic pain and disability, affecting more than two million Australians.

Routine x-rays aren't recommended to diagnose the condition. Instead, GPs can make a diagnosis based on symptoms and medical history.

Yet nearly half of new patients with knee osteoarthritis who visit a GP in Australia are referred for imaging. Osteoarthritis imaging costs the health system A\$104.7 million each year.

Our new study shows using x-rays to diagnose knee osteoarthritis can affect how a person thinks about their knee pain — and can prompt them to consider potentially unnecessary knee replacement surgery.

What happens when you get osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis arises from joint changes and the joint working extra hard to repair itself. It affects the entire joint, including the bones, cartilage, ligaments and muscles.

It is most common in older adults, people with a high body weight and those with a history of knee injury.

Many people with knee osteoarthritis experience persistent pain and have difficulties with everyday activities such as walking and climbing stairs.

How is it treated?

In 2021-22, more than 53,000 Australians had knee replacement surgery for osteoarthritis.

Hospital services for osteoarthritis, primarily driven by joint replacement surgery, cost \$3.7 billion in 2020-21.

While joint replacement surgery is often viewed as inevitable for osteoarthritis, it should only be considered for those with severe symptoms who have already tried appropriate non-surgical treatments. Surgery carries the risk of serious adverse events, such as blood clot or infection, and not everyone makes a full recovery.

Most people with knee osteoarthritis can manage it effectively with — education and self-management; exercise and physical activity; weight management (if necessary); and medicines for pain relief (such as paracetamol) and non-steroidal anti-

inflammatory drugs).

A common misconception

A common misconception is that osteoarthritis is caused by "wear and tear".

However, research shows the ex-



tent of structural changes seen in a joint on an x-ray does not reflect the level of pain or disability a person experiences, nor does it predict how symptoms will change.

Some people with minimal joint changes have very bad symptoms, while others with more joint changes have only mild symptoms. This is why routine x-rays aren't recommended for diagnosing knee osteoarthritis or guiding treatment decisions.

Instead, guidelines recommend a "clinical diagnosis" based on a person's age (being 45 years or over) and symptoms: experiencing joint pain with activity and, in the morning, having no joint-stiffness or stiffness that lasts less than 30 minutes.

Despite this, many health professionals in Australia continue to use x-rays to diagnose knee osteoarthritis. And many people with osteoarthritis still expect or want them.

What did study investigate?

Our study aimed to find out if using x-rays to diagnose knee osteoarthritis affects a person's beliefs about osteoarthritis management, compared to a getting a clinical diagnosis without x-rays.

We recruited 617 people from across Australia and randomly assigned them to watch one of three videos. Each video showed a hypothetical consultation with a general practitioner about knee pain.

One group received a clinical diagnosis of knee osteoarthritis based on age and symptoms, without being sent for an x-ray.

The other two groups had x-rays to

determine their diagnosis (the doctor showed one group their x-ray images and not the other).

After watching their assigned video, participants completed a survey about their beliefs about osteoarthritis management.

What did it find?

People who received an x-ray-based diagnosis and were shown their x-ray images had a 36% higher perceived need for knee replacement surgery than those who received a clinical diagnosis (without x-ray).

They also believed exercise and physical activity could be more harmful to their joint, were more worried about their condition worsening, and were more fearful of movement.

Interestingly, people were slightly more satisfied with an x-ray-based diagnosis than a clinical diagnosis.

This may reflect the common misconception that osteoarthritis is caused by "wear and tear" and an assumption that the "damage" inside the joint needs to be seen to guide treatment.

What does this mean for people with osteoarthritis?

Our findings show why it's important to avoid unnecessary x-rays when diagnosing knee osteoarthritis.

While changing clinical practice can be challenging, reducing unnecessary x-rays could help ease patient anxiety, prevent unnecessary concern about joint damage, and reduce demand for costly and potentially unnecessary joint replacement surgery. It could also help reduce exposure to medical radiation and lower health-care costs.

Previous research in osteoarthritis, as well as back and shoulder pain, similarly shows that when health professionals focus on joint "wear and tear" it can make patients more anxious about their condition and concerned about damaging their joints.

If you have knee osteoarthritis, know that routine x-rays aren't needed for diagnosis or to determine the best treatment for you. Getting an x-ray can make you more concerned and more open to surgery. But there are a range of non-surgical options that could reduce pain, improve mobility and are less invasive. (*The Conversation*)

"Everything that is done in the world is done by hope."
—Martin Luther
The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 192 SHILLONG, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2025

Divided India Bloc

THE Delhi election results have given a wake-up call to the opposition parties – with a clear message, "Divided you stand, United you fall." The Congress party leading the India bloc fought the polls all alone without entering into a tie-up with the dominant AAP. Results showed that a unity of the AAP and Congress could have averted a BJP victory in the national capital territory (NCT) region. The AAP won 43 per cent of the votes polled while the Congress got six per cent – a fall by over 10 per cent for the AAP and an increase by 2 per cent for the Congress compared to the last assembly polls. The BJP winning the Delhi assembly polls is fine, but a question is, where does this leave the INDIA bloc?

Had good sense prevailed, the AAP would have gone an extra mile this time to ally with the Congress simply because the BJP had put the party and its leader Arvind Kejriwal increasingly on the defensive through the Delhi liquor scam and other cases. The BJP acted with a killer instinct and held out an impressive dole to women, on which was super-imposed a luring IT cut through the Union Budget. A divided opposition fell by the wayside while the BJP laughed its way to victory. A temporary reprieve for Kejriwal's AAP in Punjab, where it holds power now, is that the BJP is not a strong force there to upset the Kejriwal-Bhagwat Singh Mann appeccart. Yet, the saffron party would try and unseat the AAP government, should a chance arise there. Mann's government is not popular there for a variety of reasons; and discontent among the people is palpable. A spark can ignite a major fire there. The Congress party in Punjab is stronger than the BJP but the INDIA bonhomie does not work there.

The Opposition alliance is bound to face fresh tests to its integrity as a new round of assembly polls are expected this year and next year. The Bihar polls are in November followed by elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Pondicherry and Kerala. The opposition is divided in Bihar; and the ruling TMC is keeping a distance from the Congress-led alliance and the left in West Bengal. In Tamil Nadu, the Congress and DMK are on a strong wicket. The Congress is hoping to wrest power from the CPIM in Kerala. The INDIA alliance as such matters more in the next round, involving states like Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh etc. These are also where the BJP draws its main sustenance from. The Congress and SP together could fare well in the last Lok Sabha polls in Uttar Pradesh. If the BSP of Mayawati too is drawn in there, the BJP might be defeated in the next assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh, which is the main battleground for the next parliamentary polls as well.

6th Meghalaya Games: A Prelude to the 39th National Games

By H H Mohrmen

The popularity of any occasion, event, function, or even unfortunate incident depends on how long people continue talking about it at the time of the event—the houses of bereaved families. In Jowai, until the beginning of the Autonomous District Council election, the recently concluded Meghalaya Games remained the talk of the town. People continued to speak about it with pride wherever they went. The residents of West Jaintia Hills, particularly Jowai, beamed with smiles as they discussed the games they had so successfully hosted.

Only Bad News Makes Good News

Although the people of Jowai still take pride in hosting a grand and successful event, across the state, memories of the games are beginning to fade. Unlike previous editions, which had their share of glitches, the Jowai Games are not widely remembered anymore. In fact, some readers may only learn about the game from this article, because nothing bad came out of it. Strangely the reason is because there was no embarrassing incident to leave a lasting impression on the public mind. Now people have this strange tendency to only remember incidents or stories which are bad or negative, and good news is quickly forgotten. There were no mishaps for people to cut, edit, and turn into memes to be shared on social media platforms. Yet, the truth must be acknowledged—this was one of the best games organized by the government, and the government deserves appreciation and recognition.

This event was among the largest sporting spectacles in the state's history and Jowai made Meghalaya proud by hosting a seamless and successful event. The crowning moment was the grand opening ceremony at the newly built stadium in Wahiajer.

Credit Where It's Due

The success of the event goes to the government, particularly the local organizing committee, led by former Deputy Commissioner B.S. Sohliya and District Sports Officer Khroobok Passah. The Meghalaya Olympic Association, under the leadership of President J.F. Kharshiang and Secretary Finely Pariat who is also the son of Jowai town, played a crucial role. Of course, an event of this scale would not have been possible without the support of the government, led by Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma. The CM, his two Deputy Chief Ministers Prestone Tynsong and Sniawhalang Dhar along with his cabinet colleagues, braved

the cold winter evening to witness the event. Special mention must be made of Sports Minister Shakliar Warjri, who stayed in Jowai throughout the games, and local MLA Wailadmiki Shylla, who effectively supervised the event to ensure its smooth execution.

Is Jowai a Prelude to the National Games?

Without a doubt, the Meghalaya Games in Jowai boosted the government's confidence in hosting the 39th National Games. If the government, along with the Olympic and various sports associations, could organize and execute the Meghalaya Games so effectively, there is no reason why they cannot successfully host the National Games. The Government of Meghalaya has few more years to prepare the state till it hosts the next national games. If Jowai can do it, Shillong is in a good position to do it even better.

Need for Sports Infrastructure

My friend, Lening K Bareh, President of the State Cycling Association, invited me to flag off a cycling event. Before reaching the venue, I wondered what kind of space would be required for various cycling competitions. To my surprise, the terrain around Kiang Nangbah College and Jowai Polytechnic proved ideal for cycling events. Unlike cycling, however, many sports require proper infrastructure.

Although West Jaintia Hills now boasts of two stadiums—one in Jowai and another in Wahiajer—the district still lacks facilities for disciplines such as gymnastics, swimming, shooting, and archery, to name a few. In its effort to build sports infrastructure in the state, the Government should take inspiration from Wahiajer, where land was donated by the community and replicate this model across other districts. If Meghalaya is to achieve greater heights in sports, infrastructure must be expanded statewide.

Cycling to Success

One inspiring story from the last Meghalaya Games is that of cyclist Sharai Basaiawmoit. A hardworking athlete, he earns his livelihood as a daily wage labourer while pursuing his passion for cycling. This sport is expensive—a basic sports cycle costs a significant amount. Yet, despite financial constraints, Sharai excelled in the Jowai Games, winning multiple medals.

During my visit to the cycling track, what struck me most was his footwear.

Instead of proper shoelaces, he had tied his shoes with steel wire—a clear sign that he was either a mason or a construction labourer. His story is one of determination and perseverance. The lesson here is that athletes not only need proper facilities and playgrounds but also the necessary gear to compete. Equipment for sports like archery and cycling is costly, and financial support is essential for young talents to thrive.

Strong Local Sports Associations

The success of the Meghalaya Games also depended on robust local sports associations at the district level. The West Jaintia Hills District Sports Association (formerly JDSA) has been at the forefront of sports promotion. The district has dedicated associations for nearly every sporting discipline, which greatly aided the organizing committee. Sports association also organizes regular local competitions which serve as talent scouting platforms, preparing athletes for major events like the Meghalaya Games.

For example, in West Jaintia Hills, badminton and boxing have their own associations that organize competitions, while athletics and football are regularly promoted by the district association. The recently concluded games benefited greatly from these local bodies, which successfully hosted over 3,000 athletes from all 12 districts, along with officials. Personally, I never imagined that my town could host such a large-scale event—but full credit goes to the organizers.

Jungwaliah and Community Contributions

The success of the Meghalaya Games in Jowai was also due to local contributions. It wasn't just about the volunteers who generously gave their time and energy—it was also about infrastructure. Jowai has a tradition where almost every locality has its own Jungwaliah (community hall), now commonly referred to as club hall.

These halls, originally used for local theatrical performances (ka Bamphalar) and community meetings, vary in size based on the locality. Some, like those in Ladhlaboh, Khimusiang, Chutwaku, Tympang lawmsiang, Lion Mission and Lulong, resemble indoor stadiums. Even village like Khliehtyrihi its community hall was used for Thai boxing during the Meghalaya Games. Such contributions highlight the importance of community involvement in

Local Playgrounds and Facilities

Jowai has an advantage over other towns in the state because almost every old locality like Lulong, Panaliar, lawmsiang Tympang, Lion Tpep-pale, and Ladhlaboh has its own playground. These spaces, primarily used for football, proved invaluable during the Meghalaya Games. Additionally, institutions like Kiang Nangbah Government College, Thomas Jones College, and North East Adventist University provided their playgrounds, ensuring that most of the 29 sports disciplines were held within and around Jowai. The hostels in these colleges and universities were also used to accommodate the athletes and sports officials. Only a few events, required specialized infrastructure like gymnastics, golf and swimming, had to be conducted in Shillong.

Addressing the Imbalance in Sports Infrastructure

During the last Meghalaya Games, East Khasi Hills won the most medals, while West Jaintia Hills, the runner-up, secured only half as many. Despite having adequate infrastructure for certain events, Jowai still lacks facilities for professional-level competitions. The imbalance in sports infrastructure is undeniable—Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya and former capital of undivided Assam, enjoys significantly better facilities. Disciplines like gymnastics, swimming, and golf are exclusively available there. This uneven distribution is unfair and must be addressed to ensure equal opportunities to all the athletes representing the different districts of the state.

Government Investment Bearing Fruit

While inaugurating the games at Wahiajer, Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma emphasized that investing in sports is an investment in Meghalaya's youth. A recent anecdote reinforces this idea.

I overheard my 10-year-old and 6-year-old nephews discussing their favorite sports. Having watched the games at their father's college, Youvan the younger one said, "I want to be a basketball player when I grow up." Hedlywell his older brother immediately responded, "Then you should work hard and practice so you can one day participate in the Meghalaya Games."

It was heartening to see young children developing aspirations for sports and this is all because of the recent Meghalaya games. In a world where kids are glued to mobile screens, such dreams are truly beautiful.

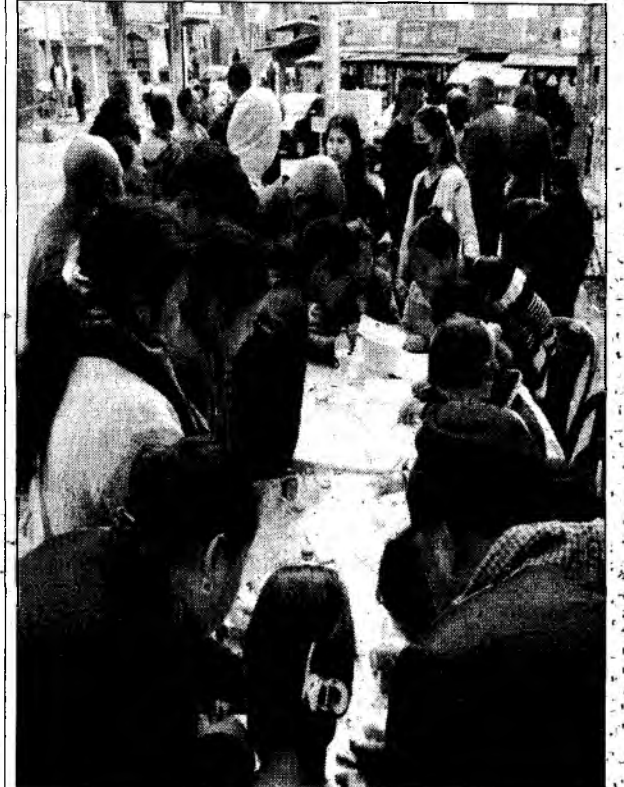
ADC Election: Fight for Bragging Rights and Path to 2028

By Wanpynshgain Jana

Given the outcome of the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the result was unexpected. In the Shillong Parliamentary Constituency, the incumbent Congress party lost the seat after being at the helm for over 25 years to a newly formed party. The United Democratic Party (UDP), which has branded itself as the strong regional party of Meghalaya, garnered only 44,563 votes. The National People's Party (NPP) lost both seats from Shillong and Tura, despite being the party with the most MLAs

as their MDC candidates to boost their chances of winning more seats. The likely prediction for NPP's seat count is 5-7.

Congress is fielding a comparably stronger list of candidates than in 2023, having followed a thorough process in ticket distribution, although it may not have been perfect. They are fielding both veterans and new faces, such as Jonathan Syiem, Banphira Lang Basaiawmoit, and George C Sunn. However, many constituencies remain com-



in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. They positioned female candidates from both constituencies. The Voice of the People Party (VPP), in contrast, achieved a surprising victory and won the MP election by a large margin. However, since that episode, several developments have affected the VPP's public image, including ticket allocation issues and opposition from Adelbert Nongrum, one of its MLAs.

petitive, and there is a strong likelihood that Congress will come second in several. Given the recent trend of defections, there is a trust deficit among the public. The predicted number of seats for Congress is 2-3. HSPDP, the OG of regional parties, has a strong base in the West Khasi Hills, particularly in Mawshynrat and Mawthadraishan. The sitting MLA from Mawthadraishan fielded his sister to contest for the ADC election. If she wins, the constituency will be represented by the brother-sister duo. There are reports that HSPDP could win MDC seats in both constituencies.

Now, as we approach the 2025 ADC elections, each party will want to win decisively to project their future outlook. Looking at the VPP, which garnered over 5,00,000 votes in the Lok Sabha election—how many of these votes will they retain this time? It seems that many of the votes from people who typically support regional parties like HSPDP and UDP will return to their base.

On the other hand, we have parties such as BJP, KHNAM, and independent candidates. While their chances might not be as strong, they could still win a few seats here and there.

"The UDP is fielding strong candidates and is not taking this election lightly. They are fielding current MLAs such as Pius Marwein, Synshar Kupar Roy Thabah, and Matthew B Kurbah, and they have a strong chance to win more than 6-7 seats. With 12 MLAs, the candidates in other constituencies are also garnering support from their respective MLAs."

Some might have shifted allegiance to the VPP, but most are likely to return to support their original party or candidate. The prediction is that the VPP will likely win 6-7 seats. The UDP is fielding strong candidates and is not taking this election lightly. They are fielding current MLAs such as Pius Marwein, Synshar Kupar Roy Thabah, and Matthew B Kurbah, and they have a strong chance to win more than 6-7 seats. With 12 MLAs, the candidates in other constituencies are also garnering support from their respective MLAs.

Strong contenders include Lambor Malngiang, Teibor Pathar, PT Sawkmie, Ricky Shullai, and others.

As the counting day approaches, every political party will be on edge, knowing that the results will shape the future of the political landscape. Will the VPP be here to stay and, perhaps, one day form the government? Will Congress stage a comeback and reaffirm its position as the dominant party it once was? Will the NPP impose its dominance and showcase what it means to be the largest party with the most MLAs? Will the UDP retain its title as the people's regional party, or is that image slowly fading? Time will tell. Let's wait and see on February 24. In the end, regardless of who wins, let's remember the true meaning of democracy, as Abraham Lincoln once said: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people."

At the end of the day, the people should benefit, and 'Jaitbnyriew' should survive.

Although the NPP won 26 seats in 2023, changes in the same year saw two PDF MLAs join their camp. Later in 2024, the NPP convinced three more Congress MLAs to switch allegiance and join them. Leading up to the 2024 MP election, many prominent Congress leaders, such as Rona Khymdeit (ex-MDC), Batskhem Marbanian (Sitting MDC), and Carness Sohshang (Sitting MDC), jumped ship and joined the NPP. The question arises: will people choose the party or the individual candidates? Similar to the UDP, the NPP is also fielding sitting MLAs

Letters to the Editor

Beyond brick & timber: A citizen's call to build the future at St. Anthony's

Editor,
The impending demolition of the venerable St. Anthony's Lower Primary School building in Shillong has awakened a wave of emotion across our beloved state. As a proud citizen of Meghalaya—where our culture and education intertwine to shape both our identity and our future—I, too, feel the ache that comes with the prospect of losing something so deeply rooted in our collective memory. That weathered wooden structure is not merely a schoolhouse; it is a beacon of legacy, a monument to the hopes of generations, and a silent witness to the journeys of countless young souls who dared to dream within its walls.

But while history stands tall in our hearts, we must face an unflinching truth—the past cannot cradle the future. Beneath the warm embrace of nostalgia lies the unsettling reality of time's erosion. That once-sturdy frame, which sheltered our aspirations, now teeters under the weight of age. Every day, nearly 800 innocent children sit beneath that roof—bright eyes filled with the promise—unaware that the very structure meant to pro-

tect them now carries the risk of harm. The timber that once held the laughter of our youth is now weakened, whispering a warning we cannot afford to ignore. This is no longer a debate between heritage and progress; it is a test of our collective courage to choose what is right over what is familiar. It is a call for action—urgent, resolute, and clear. In my conversations with the most revered voices in education and legal guardianship, a single truth rings out: progress is not the enemy of history. It is its truest custodian.

Fr. Saji SJD, the respected Director of Don Bosco Technical School, offered words that struck me like a clarion call: "Our emotional bond should be with the institution, not merely with the building." His message is one we must all carry in our hearts. The spirit of St. Anthony's—its soul—is not confined to those aging bricks and weary beams. It lives in the knowledge that blossoms within its classrooms. It breathes in the resilience and ambition of every child who has ever walked through its doors. That is the legacy we must safeguard—not wood and mortar, but minds and futures. The proposed state-of-the-art, multi-storied replacement is not simply a new building; it is a promise forged from vision and responsibility. A promise that the children of Meghalaya will learn in classrooms filled with light—where technol-

ogy and creativity walk hand in hand. A promise that no parent will ever wonder if their child is safe within those walls. A promise that the roof above their heads will not tremble under age, but stand proud—strong enough to shelter dreams yet to be imagined.

This is not merely construction—it is an act of faith in our children and in our future. Legal experts and esteemed educationists have reminded us that adherence to modern safety codes is not a luxury; it is a moral duty. The intervention by the Meghalaya High Court to evaluate the heritage significance of the existing structure is both necessary and thoughtful. But let us be clear—while heritage must be respected, the lives and futures of our children must reign supreme.

To those who grieve the loss of this historic building, I extend my hand—not in consolation, but in unity. Together, let us honour the past by ensuring that it fuels a brighter future. True remembrance is not found in preserving what time has weakened—it is found in ensuring that the story continues, stronger and bolder than ever before.

Let us not simply accept this change—let us lead it. Let our voices rise—not in sorrow, but in triumph—as we stand at the cusp of something greater. Our deepest reverence for the past is not in clinging to its ruins, but

in laying the foundation for what is yet to come.

We owe our children more than echoes of what was—we owe them the pillars of what can be. Let this demolition not mark the end of an era, but the dawn of a new one—a future where St. Anthony's stands taller than ever, not merely as a school, but as a symbol of safety, excellence, and enduring hope.

Let us build this future—together. For our children. For our state. For generations yet to dream.

Yours etc.,
Paula Pakyntein,
Via email

Have a heart for the school children!

Editor,
We the parents of St. Anthony's LP School, express the urgent need for a safe and strong school building for our children. It may be noted that the Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian School, popularly known as KJP, was reduced to ashes on 21.05.2023. This was one of the oldest buildings, made of wood. Such incidents are unpredictable and occur without warning. These unforeseen dangers pose a significant risk. It is unfortunate that, in the case of St. Anthony's LP School—an institution that shapes and nurtures young children from kindergarten to class five—the risks to life and safety are clearly visible. The wooden structures would

not withstand even a mild earthquake, and are highly susceptible to fire, putting our children in grave danger. However, it is disheartening to know that some individuals value heritage over human lives, forgetting that preserving the past should not come at the cost of safety. A new and modern building would provide a safer learning environment. We pray that good sense prevails and hope the outcome benefits everyone.

Yours etc.,
S. Kharkongor & other parents of a St. Anthony's L. P. School, Laitumkhrach,
Via email

Urgent need for a new school building at St Anthony's LP School

Editor,
As a dedicated teacher at St. Anthony's Lower Primary School, I am writing to highlight the urgent need for a new school building to replace our aging wooden structure. While we cherish the memories associated with this old building, it is imperative that we prioritize the safety and well-being of our students.

The building had become increasingly unstable; it used to shake noticeably even when a bus passed by. The situation was particularly alarming during recess when approximately 700 children

run and play in the corridors. The vibrations during these moments were not only unsettling but also frightening for both students and teachers alike. It was a daunting experience to conduct a class in an environment where the very foundation beneath us felt compromised.

Only those who work directly in the field know the heat of the sun. The teachers know all too well how nerve-racking it was to teach in such conditions, where every sound and movement raised concerns about safety. Our primary responsibility is to provide a nurturing and secure learning environment, but that had become increasingly difficult within these walls. Constructing a new school building would not only address these pressing safety issues but also allow us to create a modern educational space that meets contemporary standards and ensure that our students receive the quality education they deserve.

We look forward to the earliest completion of the new building at St. Anthony's Lower Primary School.

Yours etc.,
F Pohiti,
A concerned teacher, St. Anthony's Lower Primary School,
Via email

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

"The good life is one inspired by love
and guided by knowledge."

— Bertrand Russell

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 194 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2025

Elections done: Time to deliver

THE VPP has romped home to victory and firmly established that people are craving for a change and are no longer willing to be taken for granted. A single-party victory in the KHADC has come after a long time and it gives the VPP a redoubtable mandate to fulfil its electoral promises without being hamstrung by other coalition partners. This election has also put to question the claims of regional parties like the UDP and HSPDP to be the bulwark of regional aspirations and to be addressing the specific needs of the tribal communities of Meghalaya. In the KHADC the UDP is reduced to 5 seats and HSPDP to just 1 seat. It shows a quantum shift of the electorate towards the VPP for reasons that require a deeper study by political analysts. It would be fair to say that the voting public of the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya have decided to repose their faith in the VPP as the political avant-garde that seeks to transform the way politics is done in Meghalaya. In fact, the VPP had proven that it is a force to reckon with after its Lok Sabha candidate Ricky Syngkon rode to victory without the usual pre-electoral extravaganza that marks other parties. The VPP enunciated its principles of fighting for clean election and clean governance and demonstrated it with visible action.

Voters in Meghalaya are fatigued and disillusioned by the corruption that underlines governance of the state. They see the growing divide in society between the affluent with political clout and the less fortunate who are pushed to the margins. It is this second category of voters who want to give the VPP a chance with the hope that this new party with its promise to revolutionise governance and remove corruption will succeed in its mission. Surprisingly the people of Jaintia Hills voted differently. In Jaintia Hills the VPP almost swept the polls in the Lok Sabha election but this time the NPP managed to get 13 seats. Of course, Deputy Chief Minister, Sniawbhalang Dhar must have had a hand in ensuring that his influence has not waned. After all Jaintia Hills with its rich coal resources is his and his family's pocket borough. Losing the Jaintia ADC elections would put a spanner in the works. With 13 MDCs the NPP with its alliance partner in the MDA Government, the UDP would have a majority and perhaps rope in the Independents too.

Both the KHADC and JHADC have been found amiss in their functioning especially with the use of public funds. A weak bureaucracy due largely to limited resources and lack of accountability in financial matters as pointed out by the Comptroller and Auditor General repeatedly does not augur well for the Councils. Both Councils have to usher in transparency especially in appointments to different administrative positions for this will be keenly watched. In both the ADCs there is a strong Opposition which should play its role of an accountability watchdog, disciplining and questioning the Executive Council through the five years.

Letters to the Editor

Election sobriety

Editor,
The dust has finally settled, and the mandate is clear: the VPP will lead the KHADC. The VPP must now focus on fulfilling their campaign promises, as outlined in their manifesto. This is not only a matter of duty and responsibility but also a testament to the trust placed in them by the people. The 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution is a sacred document that guarantees the autonomy of tribal communities, including those in Meghalaya. As such, the VPP must prioritize strengthening traditional culture and institutions, which are the very fabric of Khasi society.

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) has a rich history of self-governance. The VPP must work to empower traditional institutions, such as the Syiemships and the Dorbar Shnong, which play a vital role in maintaining social order and promoting community development. Meghalaya is home to a rich cultural heritage, with a unique blend of traditional practices, customs, and beliefs. The VPP must take concrete steps to preserve and promote this cultural heritage, including the protection of sacred sites, the promotion of traditional arts and crafts, and the promotion of the Khasi language and its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. As the VPP sets out to fulfil its campaign promises, it is essential that they maintain transparency and accountability.

The VPP has a historic

opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of the people of Meghalaya. By upholding the sanctity of the 6th Schedule, empowering traditional institutions, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring accountability and transparency, the VPP can truly fulfil its mandate and bring about positive change to the region.

Yours etc.,
Kevin M Shangpliang
Via email

Political Shifts in Meghalaya

Editor,
The recent electoral success of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) in the JHADC and KHADC, securing 17 seats in the KHADC and 8 seat in the JHADC, marks a pivotal shift in the state's political landscape. Traditionally, electoral outcomes in Meghalaya have been significantly shaped by individual personalities rather than substantive ideological commitments. However, the VPP's emergence as a formidable political entity, particularly in regions such as the Jaintia Hills, where its electoral prospects were previously regarded as marginal, signifies a discernible transformation in voter behaviour. This development underscores the evolving dynamism of Meghalaya's political sphere and necessitates strategic recalibrations by both established and nascent political entities. The continued dominance of the National People's Party (NPP) in the state's political framework underscores its entrenched electoral appeal. Nevertheless, the ascendance of the VPP signals an evolu-

Reclaiming Tradition: Role of Women in Khasi Polity

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

With the Autonomous District Council elections now concluded, the focus should shift to utilising the public mandate to reinforce matrilineal norms and traditions within the various traditional and non-traditional institutions under its jurisdiction. This is particularly regarding the role of women in the latter, i.e., the Dorbar Shnong, which at the moment does not conform to the traditional norms. Despite the KHADC giving permission for two women to be part of the executive committee of the Dorbar, there is strong resistance to their inclusion on account of 'time immemorial' traditions. However, over the last few months, there is greater clarity on the antecedent of the Dorbar Shnong as a modern institution with its origins being tied to the British establishing Shillong as the headquarters of Assam. The culture emerged from existing traditions of the Dorbar-Kur, Dorbar-Raid and Dorbar-Hima. Thus, some would argue whether we should accept the Dorbar Shnong as a traditional institution, since it's simply an innovation within a traditional system. I would agree to such a claim if the Dorbar Shnong included women, but it currently does not. This exclusion violates traditional customs. The question that arises is about the role of women in traditional Khasi polity and how their inclusion would strengthen the customary norms and traditions, for whose protection the Indian Constitution adopted the Sixth Schedule.

It is general knowledge that Khasis are a matrilineal community with the lineage going to the mother instead of the father. This custom is not only specific to familial relations but also determines the rule of succession to a political office, the most important being that of the Syiem or head of the Hima. Hamlet Bareh's Ngap Kynta's book 'The History and Culture of the Khasi People' is a good book to understand the origin of the various Himas and the various stories associated with them. In it he gave the rules of succession to the position of a Syiem who is always to be succeeded not by his own son, but by the male offspring of Syiem-Sad who is his eldest sister. Next in line are the eldest sons of the daughters of the Syiem-Sad. If no eligible candidates exist, they choose the nearest maternal cousin brother. This emphasis on the female line was quite clear when Bareh listed the name of the Syiems of Hima Jaintiapur. For

example, Ka Juh's son Maha Kussain reigned from 1516 to 1532 A.D.; Ka Mut's husband was Langpoh Kongor who begat two daughters, Ka Drop, Ka Ler and a son, Bor Guhain, who reigned from 1548 to 1564 A.D. and so on and so forth. Women are, thus, the kingmakers who give legitimacy to the claim of an aspirant for the throne. But what happens if there are no eligible males? This is where it becomes interesting.

The rules of succession dictate that in case on non-availability of eligible males, the inheritance passes to the senior aunts or eldest daughters. It is most probably for this reason that in 1878, W.S. Clarke, the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills when tasked with holding official inquiries into issues of succession to the position of Syiem concluded that "females are eligible for the office of Syiem". Reeje Ray's 2023 book, "Placing the Frontier in British North-East India", discloses this finding. This raises an intriguing question: were there women rulers in the past?

If there were women Syiems, history has forgotten their names (I would welcome corrections), but the origin stories of the various Raids, the Khasi's foundational political institutions, offer some indirect evidence. According to Fabian Lyngdoh's 2016 thesis, 'A Study on the Nature and Roles of Traditional Governance Institutions among the Khasis in Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya' Raids emerged from ancient Nongbah or the first settlement. These fortified settlements housed people who only lived to cultivate. The Longsams' Dorbar administered the population. This Dorbar, composed of the Syiem, Lyngdoh, and Basans, appointed Tyimmen Shnongs as disciplinarians in each kynto settlement (present-day Shnong). One can already see that neither the Dorbar Shnong nor the Rangbah Shnong existed at this point. The thesis then recounts the founding of the Raids based on oral narratives. One in particular is very interesting.

Raid Iapngar is one of the earliest Raids in the region, which existed formerly as an independent Hima before the founding of Hima Shyllong. The name 'Iapngar' comes from Ka Ngar, a woman who died at the site of the Raid's first settlement, the Nongbah, wherein ideological resonance and governance efficacy are gradually supplanting personality-driven politics. Both the NPP and the VPP must adapt their strategic orientations to reflect these shifting paradigms, ensuring that their political engagement remains attuned to the electorate's evolving aspirations. As democratic institutions continue to mature, the imperative for political parties to remain responsive, transparent, and accountable to the citizenry becomes increasingly paramount.

Yours etc.,
Trememi Lamare,
Scholar, Political Science Department, NEHU Political Shifts in Meghalaya
Via email

Multi-faceted approach to addressing substance abuse

Editor,
Drug abuse has emerged as a significant public health issue in Meghalaya, with rising concerns over its impact on individuals and communities. The state's unique geographical location and socio-economic challenges have contributed to the proliferation of substance abuse, necessitating comprehensive interventions.

Prevalence of Drug Abuse in Meghalaya: Recent data indicates a troubling increase in drug abuse cases across Meghalaya. The state's proximity to international borders has facilitated the influx of illicit

substances, exacerbating the situation. While exact figures are continually evolving, reports suggest a notable rise in the number of individuals, particularly youth, engaging in substance use.

The DREAM Project: A Beacon of Hope: In response to the escalating crisis, the Meghalaya government launched the Drug Reduction Elimination and Action Mission (DREAM) project. This initiative aims to combat drug abuse through a multi-faceted approach, focusing on prevention, rehabilitation, and community involvement.

Key components of the DREAM project include:
Awareness Campaigns: Educational programs targeting schools and colleges to inform students about the dangers of drug use.
Rehabilitation Centers: Establishment of facilities offering medical and psychological support to individuals seeking to overcome addiction.

Community Engagement: Mobilizing local communities to participate in monitoring and reporting drug-related activities.

Law Enforcement Collaboration: Strengthening ties between law enforcement agencies to curb the supply of illicit substances.

The DREAM project has garnered positive feedback for its holistic approach, addressing both the supply and demand aspects of the drug problem.

The War on Drugs: Securing Meghalaya's Future: The fight against drug abuse is not merely a law enforcement issue but a battle for the state's future. Substance abuse undermines societal structures,

hampers economic development, and poses severe health risks. By investing in initiatives like the DREAM project, Meghalaya is taking proactive steps to safeguard its youth and ensure a healthier, more prosperous future.

The Way Forward: The drug abuse crisis in Meghalaya is a multifaceted issue that demands an equally comprehensive response. While the government's allocation of Rs. 50 crore and the establishment of the Anti-Narcotic Task Force are positive steps, the state must also address root causes like unemployment and lack of awareness.

Collaboration between the government, civil society, and local communities is essential to create a supportive environment for recovery and prevention. By focusing on education, rehabilitation, and law enforcement, Meghalaya can not only tackle the immediate crisis but also build resilience for the future.

This fight is not just about saving lives—it is about securing the future of Meghalaya's youth and preserving the social fabric of the state. With concerted efforts and sustained commitment, Meghalaya can overcome this challenge and emerge as a model for other regions grappling with similar issues.

Yours etc.,
Teresa Phawa Lyngdoh
Via email

gdo's thesis in fact gives more evidence regarding the participation of women in running the affairs of the traditional institutions.

The highest administrative and territorial authority of the Raid was ruled by a woman called Ka Long Saring, who was very arrogant and contemptuous of the poor. However, another woman, Ka Luh Shadap (a Pnar), deposed her in an eating competition the Basans administered. For those who want to know the details of the story, they can download the thesis from Shodhganga, which is a repository of all theses done in Indian universities. For the sake of brevity, I will just inform readers that it involved pork and a sour fruit called sohnaing (local lemon).

Having defeated Ka Long Saring, Ka Luh Shadap took over as leader and Lyngdoh of the raid. Fabian Lyngdoh did not mention what was the title of the leader. At another place, he mentions that after a few generations, the Lyngdoh family expressed their inability to carry out the roles of both the Lyngdoh and the Syiem. Thereafter, the Basans adopted a Karbi family from Raid Kharpati to establish a Jait Syiem in Raid Iapngar. Was Ka Luh Shadap (Ka Long Saring before her) the Lyngdoh and the Syiem? Maybe he can clarify this when he reads this piece.

The story of Ka Long Saring, however, does not end here. She and her family led a wandering life for a while and eventually settled at Raid Nongtung. Today her clan is one of the Jait Basan clans of Raid Nongtung. Another version states that Ka Long Saring's family wandered to Raid Nonglyngdoh in Nongpoh, where they were inducted as the Jait Syiem of Raid Nonglyngdoh under the name 'Ki Syiem Marir'.

Could Ka Long Saring and Ka Luh Shadap be an example of an early system where women were the leaders of a political unit, in this case the Raid. They were the Lyngdoh and the Syiem, either separately or holding both titles together. As Khasi polity evolved and Raids came together to form Himas, their importance continued to give legitimacy to the claims. And when all else failed, they would again take up the reins of leadership. Unless Hamlet Bareh Ngap Kynta or W.S. Clarke faked the rules of succession and the story of the founding of Raid Iapngar was a fabrication told to Fabian Lyngdoh, women could and did hold leadership positions in Khasi polity. So, it is highly surprising that women can become leaders but cannot take part in proceedings of the Dorbar. Fabian Lyng-

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

institutions, upending constitutional guarantees and demolishing the federal apparatus. Musk's chainsaw-waving to depict the rapid cutting of federal services is as perversely vaudevillian as the 2003 defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's delight when he announced "shock and awe" over Iraq. The latter was said to be in search of what most of the world knew, were non-existent Weapons of Mass Destruction, WMDs, in Iraq, while the chainsaw is said to be in the hunt for corruption and waste in the US bureaucracy that is equally likely to be non-existent. The real purpose of both is different: to exert power and dominance, to control resources, to give more to themselves while snatching more away from those who have less. It is known that slavery was the original American big business; it becomes clear that some version of slavery remains the main US business to this day.

In this assessment, it is possible to defend Trump by arguing that he has only ripped the mask off the face of the US. He has torn away the pseudosophistication and shown America like it always has been right till he took over the presidency in his second term, sans filters. The pretence of diversity, equity and inclusiveness or the talk of democracy, freedom and peace or indeed the idea of civil rights, racial equality or fairness was the big US hoax that Trump is calling out now. Forget the globe, we don't celebrate democracy in the US itself. Trump appears to say, as he indeed went on to tell the Governor of Maine at a televised meeting: "I am the federal law".

While sections of the US intelligentsia berate the Trump-Vance government, it might be useful for those indignant now to study the language of power and control as standard US behaviour, at how it has always been in the DNA of the US and how such abuse has landed on others in the world. Americans have typically either supported it or remained steadfastly oblivious to the deep damage it delivers to "aliens", the American term for those "others". The values of dominion and imperialistic control that the US has pushed to game others are the very values that it now sees in play with full force when the game has turned inward.

Forget older interventions, wars and coups the US has engineered while spending a reported 10 trillion dollars since the Cold

War erupted to stay in charge with "shock and awe", which in Iraq alone left half a million people dead, according to an academic report. Look only very recently, to those considered among the more "decent" leaders of our times.

What was Joe Biden doing when he went on supplying Israel with all the tools of its genocide in Gaza while staying completely silent on the havoc that has been brought to that land? Last year, while fighting for re-election, Biden denounced the International Criminal Court's assertion that Israel's leaders are guilty of war crimes for their campaign in Gaza. "What's happening is not genocide. We reject that," he said in a speech at the Rose Garden in the

'Shock and awe' rains on the US this time

By Jagdish Rattanani

On March 21, 2003, ITN network's John Irvine reported from Baghdad the launch of "shock and awe", the US Pentagon's encoding for immeasurable death and destruction that rained on Iraq, in the following words: "This is on a completely different scale from what has gone on before. This isn't just an attack on bricks and mortar. It is an assault on the human senses ..."

Some 22 years later, "shock and awe" has come to the US, a nation so contorted, disordered and misshapen that it will take a while for Americans (and their allies) to figure out what hit them. On the surface, it is the 1.5 leadership of Trump and Musk that is systematically dismantling the United States, eroding

He has torn away the pseudosophistication and shown America like it always has been right till he took over the presidency in his second term, sans filters. The pretence of diversity, equity and inclusiveness or the talk of democracy, freedom and peace or indeed the idea of civil rights, racial equality or fairness was the big US hoax that Trump is calling out now.

White House. Anything was okay for votes. There are those who now call him "genocidal Joe".

Or consider the Nobel Peace Prize winning US President Barack Obama. He killed more people in drone strikes across Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere than any other US President. A report from the 100-year-old US Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) notes that Obama ordered a total of 542 drone strikes, killing an estimated 3,797 people, including 324 civilians. That translates to murdering 1.3 people a day for every day of his presidency. And this reported quote from Obama to senior aides in 2011: "Turns out I'm really good at killing people. Didn't know that was gonna be a strong suit of mine." So, who is better - Obama, the erudite, polished, every-word-matters Harvard law graduate, or Trump, the non-sequiturs-mouthing rambler?

We may leave the US to its woes. But the overwhelming reach of US power combined with its recklessness means that what happens there imperils global peace and security. If the world is not to be left to suffer US excesses, leaders must engage more cautiously with an intemperate leadership. Some lessons that shine brighter than ever now.

It is good to be ever wary of a nation and a leadership that is and has historically been all about itself at the cost of others, driving others to misery as it gobbles up resources and pushes the idea of American exceptionalism. Some will argue all foreign policy works that way. But in practice, the US has the means, the willingness and the arrogance to translate its nefarious thinking to action.

It is also good to be wary of a nation that is sold on black-white stereotypes, a nation that elects its leaders based on appearances and limited, overplayed debate events rather than issues of substance. There is a lot right with the US, probably, but today it can be clear that a lot more is wrong with that nation. India needs to note that and etch some of these learnings into Indian foreign policy for now and for the future. This is a time that makes the Tito-Nehru-Nasser vision of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) look like a very bright idea indeed.

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Views are personal) (Through The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

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

"The greatest power is often simple patience."

—E. Joseph Cossman

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXVII No. 195 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2025

'Justice' at snail's pace

AS the adage goes, "Justice delayed is justice denied." Fact is, Indian courts are notorious for delayed dispensation of 'justice' and this effectively means a denial of justice. The latest to cite is the life imprisonment awarded by a Delhi court to former Congress MP, Sajjan Kumar, in a murder case linked to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi. The mass murders were in retaliation to the assassination of then prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. Some 40 years have passed after the incidents that saw the cold-blooded murder of over 2000 Sikhs. After 34 years, Sajjan Kumar was jailed in Tihar in respect of one such murder, while the present conviction is linked to two other murders. To his luck or ill-luck, he is still alive, but many other accused in the cases are already dead and gone without facing punishment from the court. Among them was another Congress veteran, HKL Bhagat, a warlord in the capital's old Delhi region, who passed away in 2005. A media frenzy is now likely, highlighting a view that "justice has been meted out to a victim's family," through this conviction. In reality, the obverse has happened. The case might not end even here and Sajjan Kumar will have more opportunities to go in appeal and up to the Supreme Court.

Over 10 years ago, the then Supreme Court chief justice did a chest-beating through a statement that some four crore cases were pending in Indian courts for unending periods. The number could obviously be much more now, as the Narendra Modi dispensations never took such things seriously. The overall scenario versus India's justice dispensation system has only gone from bad to worse under Modi's watch. Reform was the way forward. Manmohan Singh had passed a bill in parliament to introduce a national judicial appointments commission in 2014 to oversee the recruitment, appointment and transfer of judicial officers (judges) – by way of a replacement to the largely controversial collegium system where judges themselves appointed judges. Modi bravely put this legislation in cold storage. The judicial system thus is not only ailing but is riddled with corrupt practices even as there are several judges across the board who are incorruptible.

It must also be noted in the present context that the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case has dragged on for over 20 years, even as the arrested accused were Sri Lankans. This is the scenario of justice dispensation even in a situation of assassination of the nation's prime minister by foreign hands. It would appear that vested interests have the leeway to play with the systems and have the last laugh. Notably, when influential persons are put in jail, they get VIP treatment there, and they will also have the option of checking into a hospital suite to spend the rest of their life there with full comforts. Occasional bails would suffice for them to move around as well.

Keep Draft UGC Regulations 2025 on hold

By H. Srikanth

On January 6 last, Dharmendra Pradhan, the Union Minister of Education, released the Draft UGC Regulations 2025 that sets new rules to appoint teachers and academic staff, and suggests measures for maintenance of standards in institutions of higher education in the country. Jagdish Kumar, the UGC Chairperson, claims that the draft regulations infuse innovation, inclusivity, flexibility and dynamism in the higher education sector. Ever since the government placed the draft on public domain for feedback, there have been intense debates on the implications of the proposals made in the draft. Such regulations are not new. When the UPA was in power, the UGC came out with a comprehensive regulation for the same purpose in 2010. The 2010 regulations underwent some substantial amendments in 2013. After the NDA government came to power, in 2016, the UGC amended the regulations again. Within two years, the UGC came out with another set of regulations in 2018. And now, yet another set of regulations in 2025. No one knows how long these regulations, once adopted, will stay and not get superseded by another set by the UGC. Still, everyone concerned with higher education in the northeast should understand the changes proposed in the regulations.

Frequent changes in the regulations create problems for the aspiring candidates and also to the already recruited teachers in universities and colleges. They do not know which rules govern their appointment or promotion. Only a few years back, the UGC imposed the UGC-Care list on the plea that only those who publish in reputed journals would be considered for appointment and promotion. But the draft regulations dispense with the UGC-Care list and allow the universities to appoint their own committees to decide which journals are reputed and which journal articles are standard ones. Further, the draft regulations make PG education irrelevant. It says that the department in which one has done Ph.D. and/or the subject in which one got NET would automatically enable a person to teach the PG students. Further, it says that a person who has done the Four-Year UG Degree and has NET qualifications can become eligible for consideration for the post of Assistant Professor at the university. It

is now not obligatory at all that one should have studied all basic papers in the discipline to teach students at the postgraduate (PG) level. This clause is incorporated in the regulations to push forward the NEP 2020 agenda. No one is against interdisciplinary studies. But one should be first grounded and excel in one subject before foraying into other disciplines. Only having Ph.D. or the NET qualification in a subject does not enable anyone the knowledge of the discipline. If one has not studied the discipline at PG level or gained knowledge of the discipline by teaching the subject at UG level for a few years, one should not be allowed to teach the PG students.

To become a university teacher, what we basically need are sound academic background, experience in teaching, research and research guidance, and credit-worthy publications. But the regulations invoke other secondary qualifications such as consultancy, linkage with industry, policy relevance and knowledge of the so-called Indian Knowledge System (IKS) as equally relevant. The teachers will be recruited or rewarded not for imparting knowledge, but for mobilizing finances and for being loyal to a particular political ideology. Why should the faculty members teaching philosophy, literature, political science or sociology have any links with industry or possess knowledge of the IKS? Giving credence to secondary qualifications over the essential qualification leads to a decline in the quality of higher education. The regulations enable the selection committees to reject academically competent candidates and recruit or promote incompetent but influential or loyal persons. The regulations also push the idea of recruiting the so-called Professors of Practice. At one level, the UGC prescribes high academic qualifications for appointing regular professors, and at another level allows any industrialist, bureaucrat, or head of religious or social organization to become a university professor. One need not deny that there are exceptional talents in different walks of life whose association will be advantageous to the university. But when the universities are headed by VCs who themselves are biased or persons with low integrity

and academic credentials, there is every possibility of misusing the clause to recruit anyone close to the regime as Professors of Practice in the universities.

Apart from setting the rules for the recruitment and promotion of faculty, the draft regulations talk about the appointment of the Vice-Chancellor in the central and state universities. Already the opposition ruled states are up against the regulations, as it deprives any powers to the state governments in the appointment of the VCs, although they provide infrastructure and shoulder maximum financial burden. The regulations enable the central government to appoint VCs in all universities through the chancellors appointed by them. The move is being viewed by many as an attempt to take away education from the present concurrent list to the central list. These clauses in the draft, denying the rights of the states have no relevance to the central universities, where, from the beginning, the appointment of the VCs depends on the decision of the UGC and the Union Ministry of Education.

The northeastern states expect that the central government appoints good academicians who have experience in the administration of higher education. But most people in the region feel that the government dumps second or third grade academicians as the VCs of central universities in the northeast. There is a strong feeling that only those loyal to the government and its ideology are chosen as the VCs. Most VCs appointed have little knowledge of the people and the region. They are interested in carrying ahead the central agenda to please their masters in Delhi. Far from mitigating such perceptions, the regulations talk about appointing persons from industry, bureaucracy, and public life as the VCs. The relevant clauses in the draft provide legal sanctity to the central government to appoint incompetent persons having no experience in higher education as the VCs of central universities in the northeast.

Finally, ignoring the fact that education is under the Concurrent List, the UGC draft regulations talk about penalizing the states and the institutions of higher education which do not abide

by the regulations. It needs to be remembered that the UGC came into existence through an Act of the Parliament to provide grants to the universities and encourage quality teaching and research. Its powers are advisory in nature. But by providing grants, the UGC sought to extend control over different universities and higher education institutions. However, of late, the UGC has been withdrawing different grants provided to the universities. It scrapped the UGC Research Fellowships and UGC-SAP program. Recently, the central government has drastically reduced funds for the UGC. As such, the UGC itself is not in a position to provide adequate financial grants to the institutions for building and maintenance of infrastructure. The universities and colleges are encouraged to take loans from Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) to build additional infrastructure. No new teaching positions are granted in the existing departments and the universities are advised to start self-financing courses and pay the teachers' salaries from the heavy fee collected from the students. After the establishment of NAAC, the UGC has become irrelevant in matters of evaluating and advising about the quality of teaching and research in the universities. As such, the UGC has been deviating from the original tasks assigned to the institution. Such an institution is talking about penalizing the universities and states which do not follow the NEP 2020 and the proposed UGC regulations.

Not just the opposition ruled states but several citizens with commitment to quality education and organizations in the country also view the draft regulations undemocratic and anti-constitutional. They have been demanding withdrawal of the regulations. The regulations in the present form show no solution to the problems of higher education in the northeastern states. If implemented, they pose a great threat to the autonomy of the universities. It is a good practice to take feedback from the public. But the proper democratic forum to decide on national education policy is the Indian Parliament. The draft regulations should be placed for discussion in the parliament. Let the people's representatives in parliament debate and decide on regulations needed for running the institutions of higher education in the country.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

A Five-Star Jacuzzi...!

Wow! Haven't we as a nation mastered the art of pretending normalcy? You know, that fine, delicate, absolutely baffling art of putting on a straight face and saying, "Everything's fine!" Even when our world is going up in flames?

It's like we are in a small, rickety boat in the middle of a storm, and as huge ships throw lifelines to us, we shout back, "No thanks, we're good!" before vigorously bailing out water with a leaky bucket.

The first lifeline was thrown by a developed nation saying we ranked somewhere far behind on the Hunger Index. "Nonsense!" we shouted back, "Our people are well-fed!" And before anyone could point at the skeletal children staring from village corners, we launched a campaign to ban hunger reports.

The next two lifelines, those meddling attempts to highlight our dwindling freedom of speech and the rise of religious persecution, were flung back even faster. "How dare they question us! We are the land of tolerance!" we roared, while quietly making space in jails for those who dared to raise their voices. "There's no water in our boat!" we kept

even as facts, figures, and, well, actual bodies pile up.

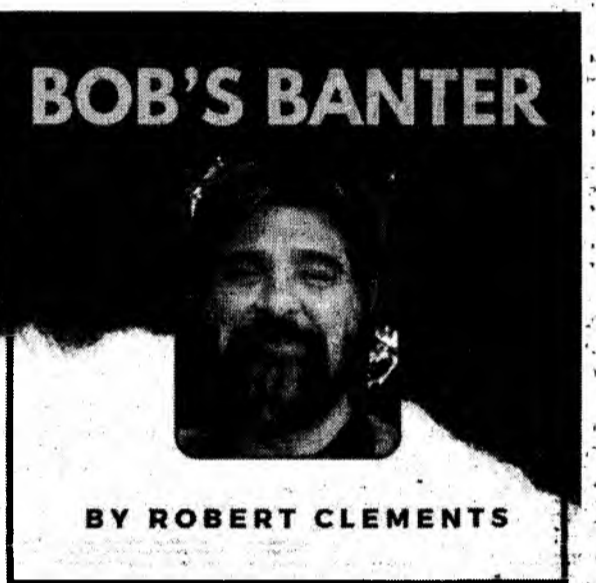
It's like they're trying to say, "Hey, don't worry about the dead people, let's focus on the pretty lights and nice music!"

Ah yes, the distractions! Those pretty lights and nice music are the 'religious fervour being purposefully stoked,' the renaming of roads, the 'us versus them' propaganda, and, of course, our own taxpayers' money magically appearing in voters' bank accounts before every election.

Meanwhile, our little boat sinks. And the orchestra plays on.

And if you think this is all too much, let's talk about Manipur. Oh, wait, we aren't supposed to! The state has been burning for months, torn apart by ethnic violence, bloodshed, and sheer human suffering. But where's the outrage? Where's the action? Nowhere! Because, my dear friends, acknowledging the fire would mean putting out the fire, and that's not on the agenda. Instead, let's just pretend Manipur is fine, brush the devastation under the carpet, and move on. Just like we did with Kashmir, just like we do with everything uncomfortable.

But, you know, folks,



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

yelling, even as the rising tide reached our necks.

And so, our great pretension of normalcy continues!

Boy, do we have a masterclass in pretending normalcy right now. I mean, think about it. We've just had two of the most massive stampedes in human history – the Kumbh Mela and the Delhi railway station – and what do we get?

A big, fat, whopping pretension about the number of deaths.

"Just a minor mishap," the authorities say, casually stepping over piles of bodies. "No cause for concern."

But, hey, who needs truth when you can pretend 'normalcy,' right? It's not like people are going to fact-check or anything. And even if they do, the death certificates mysteriously reveal nothing! How convenient!

They might make some noise in Parliament, but we have a majority! A loud, chest-thumping, desk-banging, democracy-choking majority! And nobody in the country notices the giant elephant in the room.

Actually, forget the elephant. It's now a whole circus. And yet, here we are, marveling at the tricks instead of questioning the clown running the show.

Nobody's even noticing our leader's hugs aren't working anymore!

Once, our leader's hugs were magical! The mere embrace of a foreign dignitary could solve economic crises and open up billion-dollar deals. But now, after repeated crushing bear hugs, world leaders seem to be gently stepping back, preferring an awkward wave from a distance. Our country, however, continues to pretend everything is peachy. "We are beloved everywhere!" we declare, even as international meetings happen without us.

And our boat? Oh, it's definitely still afloat. Absolutely. Ignore the bubbles rising to the surface.

The government's got its best "nothing to see here!" face on, and they're trying to project a sense of normalcy,

pretending normalcy only works for so long. Eventually, the facade cracks, and the truth comes tumbling out.

It's like holding up a broken chair and insisting it's a throne. You can keep up the act as long as no one dares sit on it. But the moment reality takes a seat? Boom! Down you go. And when that happens, watch out. Because let me tell you, the backlash is going to be epic.

At first, the people whisper. Then they murmur. Then, slowly but surely, their voices rise. And when enough of them realize that their cries for help have been drowned out by official denials and government-sponsored circus acts, there's no telling what happens next.

Maybe they stop watching the magic show and start asking questions.

Maybe they stop cheering at the fireworks displays and begin wondering why there's no electricity in their homes.

Maybe they look at their empty plates and realize that slogans don't fill stomachs.

Or maybe – just maybe – they stop pretending too.

So go ahead, keep pretending like everything's fine. Keep putting on that straight face, and keep telling us that nothing's wrong. But deep down, we all know the truth. And, eventually, that truth is going to come to light.

Because, my friends, no matter how much you pretend, you can't plug all the leaks forever. The boat is sinking. The tide is rising. And whether you like it or not, the water is coming for us all.

Until then, just sit back, relax, and enjoy the boat ride. Laugh at the waves, touch the water filling the boat, and keep believing you are having the time of your life in a Five-Star jacuzzi...!

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

Letters to the Editor

The heritage hoax: When nostalgia becomes a roadblock

So much has been said, written, analysed, dissected and regurgitated in the papers of late. Articles, reports, opinion pieces and the impassioned letters to the editor, all weighing in on the matter at hand. One might think the subject is thoroughly exhausted, yet, here I am, adding my two bits to this... because, evidently, restraint isn't my strong suit!

Shillong is a city at war with itself... torn between progress and the romanticised ruins of its past. And nowhere is this contradiction more absurd than in the hand-wringing over the demolition of a school building that, by all credible accounts, was a safety hazard!

Let's get one thing straight - age alone does not confer value. If something old must be preserved simply because it is old, then let's all start hoarding moth-eaten clothes and rusted cars. What we're seeing here is not heritage conservation - it's heritage fetishisation, where sentimentality trumps common sense. The same people lamenting this demolition didn't seem to mind when the greater part of Shillong was replaced by cemented Lego structures that look like they were designed and constructed by drunk toddlers!

The city is expanding at an astounding rate, yet when a single school building makes way for something safer and

better, we're expected to weep for the past like jilted lovers. Some argue that the building should have been left alone. Had the structure cavelt in on students, the same voices now decrying its demolition would have been baying for blood.

And now, the High Court wants a replica... because apparently, what Shillong really needs is an architectural cosplay of a crumbling building. Imagine if we applied this logic to every piece of urban renewal: "A new bridge? Great idea, but can you make it wobble slightly so we don't lose the nostalgia of almost dying on the old one?"

"A newly renovated library? Wonderful. But let's ensure the books still have dog-eared pages, and the occasional missing chapter. And the chairs? Let's ensure they remain nostalgically creaky, with just the right amount of dust on the arms, to remind us of all the knowledge that has settled there over the years!"

"Modern classrooms? Fine, but please ensure they maintain that vintage leaky-roof aesthetic where students have to solve equations while dodging raindrops!"

Progress doesn't work that way. If these heritage warriors were half as vocal about Shillong's collapsing environment as they are about its collapsing buildings, we might have clean rivers, sensible urban planning and perhaps even parts of the city that don't flood at the first sign of rain.

If our grandest vision for heritage is simply to press 'rewind,' then we've

already lost the plot. True legacy is not found in bricks and mortar alone, but in the minds we shape, the spaces we build to nurture them and the foresight to know when to let go. Let's not mistake nostalgia for vision, nor confuse sentimentality with responsibility. If heritage is to mean anything at all, let it be a bridge, not a cage!

Yours etc.,
Ellerine Diengdoh,
Via email

Time to revive the Non-aligned Movement

The special article "Shock and awe" rains on the US this time," by Jagdish Rattanani (ST Feb 25, 2025) made interesting reading. The author has brought to the fore important points on the role of the US leadership in the world which is factual. Incidentally, Jeffrey D Sachs, the American Economist and Public Policy analyst, rightly stated in the European Parliament at an event titled, "The Geopolitics of Peace" on February 19, 2025 where he reminded European parliamentarian that, "To be an enemy of United States is dangerous but to be a friend is fatal." Rephrasing a quote attributed to Henry Kissinger the former U.S. Secretary of State known for his influential role in American policy during the Cold War era, Sachs argued that the US has often acted unilaterally, disregarding the views, concerns, and security interests of other nations. He emphasized that this approach has led to significant

instability and conflict, making it dangerous to be an enemy of the U.S. However, he also pointed out that being a friend of the U.S. can be equally perilous, as allies may find themselves entangled in conflicts and facing unintended consequences. The statement reflects Sachs' critical view of U.S. foreign policy and its impact on global peace and stability.

The author has rightly concluded that "This is a time that makes the Tito-Nehru-Nasser vision of the Non-Aligned Movement look like a very bright idea indeed." I cannot disagree with his conclusion. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was formally established on September 1, 1961, in Belgrade, Yugoslavia during the Cold War era to provide a platform for countries that did not wish to align with either the United States or the Soviet Union.

The founding leaders included former President Josip Broz Tito, former Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru, former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, former Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah and Indonesia's former President Sukarno. If revived, the NAM could provide a valuable platform for countries to collaborate on these and other pressing global issues, fostering a more inclusive and cooperative international community. Despite the challenges, the NAM continues to exist and holds summits, such as the recent 19th Summit in Kampala, Uganda, in January 2024. The movement still advocates for the interests

of developing countries and promotes principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. In today's complex geopolitical landscape, there are several reasons why reviving NAM could be beneficial.

1. The current global situation is increasingly characterised by multipolarity, with multiple power centres such as the U.S., China, the European Union, and others. The NAM can play a role in promoting a balanced and multipolar world order.

2. The NAM can serve as a platform for cooperation among developing countries, addressing issues such as poverty, climate change and economic development. This can help amplify the voices of the Global South in international forums.

3. In an era of renewed great power competition, the NAM can provide a space for countries to maintain their neutrality and independence, avoiding entanglement in the rivalries between major powers.

4. The NAM can focus on contemporary global challenges such as terrorism, cyber threats, and pandemics. By working together, member states can develop collective strategies to address these issues.

5. Also the NAM can advocate for humanitarian and development goals, promoting peace, security and sustainable development. This can help create a more just and equitable international order.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

VPP creates history

Editor,
History has been created in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council with a nascent party called the Voice of the People's Party (VPP) winning with 17 seats setting a precedent in the history of regional politics and dynamics. The people have seen, read and spoken their minds that they cannot be taken as gullible voters driven not by emotional or sentimental politics but by pragmatism and dialogue over governance and social issues that have affected many in the past. More importantly is that the VPP does not need coalitions to form the EC in the KHADC. Indeed, the oratory skills of the VPP leadership cannot be taken lightly.

The sad part is Congress which once upon a time took the call in forming the Executive Committee has now been humbled to ZERO with inter-nal rumblings only to benefit the VPP whereas for the UDP and NPP their alliance often dubbed as an 'unholy relationship' culminated into just 4 and 5 seats respectively. Let us wait and watch what the coming days unfold and see what transformation and reforms would change the district councils.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin
Wankhar,
Via email

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

"Rudeness is a weak imitation of strength."

—Eric Hoffer

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 196 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2025

Time to infuse professionalism in ADCs

THE MDCs elected this time are mostly first timers and relatively young. Politics whether at the State legislature level or in the district councils is a profession. It does not come naturally. There is a need for training in the profession. While moving a motion for discussion, the MLA/MDC doing so has to have done her/his homework and read up every piece of information on that particular motion and even sought legal counsel if needed from lawyers specialised in constitutional law. Since there is no strict requirement of minimum qualification to contest for the MLA/MDC election we have had people who stumble their way through sessions and are elected purely because they fulfilled people's personal requirements and were able to pay for such peoples' personal needs. But this is 2025 and things are changing faster than we can keep pace with. MLAs and MDCs are expected to be technologically savvy not just in accessing their social media accounts or posting stuff there but to also be one up on the bureaucracy which actually has to deliver governance to the last mile.

A Minister in the state government or Executive Member in the KHADC must be able to read between the lines of what is/are being put up for their endorsement. It's a different matter if there is wrong intent and a Minister/EM is in league with an officer to get money out of a scheme. This is common in the Public Works Department where a minister instructs the engineer in charge of a project to see how much can accrue to his personal coffers. This is a malaise that has afflicted Meghalaya for decades and that is why the state of our roads are pathetic and require annual maintenance. It is noticed that those MLAs/MDCs in the Opposition don't come up with actual ground research on such failed projects to expose the government. People only hear half-baked arguments and allegations not based on substantive facts which could have been procured through the Right to Information route. The legislators in Meghalaya have a set of researchers to help them solicit important information from different departments. The ADCs need a similar set of scholars to guide them and bring the professionalism that is required to run the Councils as they should be run in an enlightened world and not as they have been managed thus far.

Councillors in particular need to touch base with the environmental problems that are afflicting the state through reckless mining and quarrying before Meghalaya faces devastation through flash floods and other unpredictable weather conditions. In this aspect one wonders why the Executive Councils do not have a practice of sitting across the table with the state government to discuss common issues such as the management of water resources, forests and environment etc. Why should the Councils be stand-alone institutions? It's also high time that the new Executive Council streamlines village governance systems and develops a policy on that. At present the Dorbar Shnong are virtually a law unto themselves. There is no policy to tie them to a set of guidelines in village governance. Hopefully the new Executive Councils in both the KHADC and JHADC will attempt these recommendations.

From Promise to Progress
Winter capital in Tura: A strategic shift for a stronger Meghalaya

By Bijoy A. Sangma

The Case for a Winter Capital in Tura

The demand for declaring Tura as the winter capital of Meghalaya has gained unprecedented momentum. Over the past few years, the issue has transitioned from political discourse to mass mobilization, hunger strikes, and even violent protests. Organizations such as the Garoland State Movement Committee (GSMC), the A'chik State People's Front (ASPF), and the A'chik Conscious Holistically Integrated Krima (ACHIK) have intensified their advocacy, urging the Meghalaya government, led by Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma, to fulfil a long-standing aspiration of the Garo community.

Their argument? Equitable development, governance accessibility, and a historical promise left unfulfilled since Meghalaya attained statehood in 1972. Their argument is simple: Meghalaya is not a single-hill state, but a diverse landmass with distinct Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo regions. If the government truly aims for inclusive governance, then administrative power must be decentralized beyond Shillong.

The demand for a second capital in Tura has been met with political caution, administrative hesitancy, and, at times, outright opposition. Yet, the demand has only intensified over the years, gaining renewed momentum as the Garo community asserts its right to fair representation and regional development.

The case for Tura as a winter capital has drawn further inspiration from a similar move by Assam, where Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma recently announced the establishment of a Raj Bhavan in Tezpur and a Mini-Secretariat in Silchar.

A vision conceived five decades ago

The demand for a winter capital is not new. It dates back to Meghalaya's statehood movement in 1972, when leaders envisioned Shillong and Tura as co-capitals to ensure administrative accessibility across all regions. However, five decades later, the vision remains unfulfilled leading to a growing sense of alienation among the people of Garo Hills, who feel that governance remains Shillong-centric and disconnected from their needs.

In June, 2010, then-Chief Minister Dr. Mukul M. Sangma announced in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly that the government planned to establish a Raj Bhavan Annex and Mini-Secretariat in Tura to enhance governance efficiency. His remarks came in response to then-Leader of Opposition Conrad K. Sangma, who had raised concerns about the administrative delivery system and the role of Joint Directorates in Tura.

In January 2024, Meghalaya took a small step towards this vision by inaugurating the Raj Bhavan in Tura. However, the larger vision remained unfulfilled. Successive governments are yet to take concrete steps toward its implementation. This long-standing expectation, coupled with slow progress, has only intensified the call for action. The renewed push for a winter capital is not just about political aspirations - it is about revisiting a commitment made decades ago and ensuring that development reaches all corners of Meghalaya.

yet his administration has not taken concrete steps toward implementation. The primary concern remains the cost of infrastructure development. Establishing a second Secretariat, fully functional Raj Bhavan, and government offices in Tura would require massive financial commitment that the state may find difficult to generate.

Meghalaya's Health Minister Dr. Ampareen Lyngdoh, has dismissed the idea, arguing that a capital shift could open a Pandora's box of demands from other districts. "If every district starts saying, 'Bring this to my district,' it will be difficult for us to administrate," she remarked in a public statement.

Adding to this complexity is the volatile history of protests and unrest surrounding the issue. In July 2023, mass demonstrations turned violent when an angry mob gathered outside the Chief Minister's office in Tura. The protest escalated into clashes with law enforcement, resulting in injuries to five police personnel and the imposition of a night curfew. Such incidents highlight the deep-seated frustration among the people, who feel marginalized and ignored in the larger governance framework of Meghalaya.

Furthermore, the economic feasibility of a dual-capital system is a major concern. Critics argue that investing in a winter capital should not take precedence over urgent developmental needs in health, education, and public infrastructure.

A Pragmatic Path Forward: Finding Common Ground

Given the historical, cultural, and administrative significance of the demand, an outright rejection would only fuel more discontent. At the same time, given the economic and political challenges, declaring Tura as a full-fledged winter capital overnight may be unrealistic. However, a phased and strategic approach could provide a balanced solution that satisfies both governance efficiency and fiscal prudence.

1. Gradual Administrative Decentralization: The first step toward decentralization could involve strengthening Tura's administrative role by relocating select departments to pilot-test administrative feasibility. Establishing an Additional Secretariat in Tura, housing key departments, which have direct relevance to the region's economy and community, can be considered.

2. Infrastructure Development First: Tura lacks the necessary infrastructure to host a full-fledged government presence. Investment in roads, power supply, educational institutions, and digital governance tools should precede any administrative shift.

3. Seasonal Governance Shifts: Relocation of certain government operations to Tura between October and March and to Shillong for the remainder of the year. This approach has been successfully implemented in Jammu & Kashmir, allowing equal administrative attention to both regions without overburdening the state budget.

4. Strengthening Digital Governance: Instead of massive physical relocations,

Meghalaya can enhance e-governance and digital administration, allowing officials to function remotely from Tura for designated months. This could reduce dependence on physical presence in Shillong, making administrative services accessible remotely.

5. Special Economic Zone (SEZ): Regardless of the capital decision, Meghalaya must address the economic marginalization of Garo Hills by incentivizing private sector investments, improving connectivity, and establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Encouraging investments in IT hubs, tourism, and agribusiness could provide employment opportunities and bring private sector growth to Garo Hills. This approach would align with the state's broader economic vision while addressing the developmental imbalance between eastern and western Meghalaya.

6. Feasibility Study: The state government should commission a comprehensive study through a team comprising multi-group community leaders, all stakeholders from key communities and technical experts to objectively study economic, logistical and administrative implications.

A defining moment for Meghalaya's future

My recent interactions with citizens in Garo hills reveals that the demand for a winter capital in Tura is not merely a political slogan or administrative question but a reflection of deeper concerns regarding regional representation and governance efficiency.

The concerns of Shillong-centric governance cannot be ignored, nor can the legitimate aspirations of the Garo community be dismissed. The practical challenges - economic constraints, political resistance, and infrastructure readiness - cannot be ignored either.

The key lies in balancing fiscal responsibility with regional development, ensuring that all citizens of Meghalaya - Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo and others alike - benefit from governance that is truly representative and accessible. Whether through a full-fledged winter capital, decentralized governance hubs, or seasonal shifts in administration, the state must move beyond political indecision and work toward a model that fosters unity, efficiency, and economic prosperity.

For now, Tura's dream of becoming a winter capital remains a work in progress. Whether this long-cherished demand will finally be fulfilled or fade into political oblivion - depends on political will, collective resolve of Meghalaya's leaders, financial prudence, citizens and the vision for a truly inclusive Meghalaya.

(The author is Former Executive Director (ILC) of the BMS World Mission, UK, former National Executive Director (India) of Hagga Institute of Advanced Leadership, and former Asst. Programme Coordinator of North East Region Community Resources Management Project (IFAD-GOI), a Lawyer and a PhD Scholar in Management studies. Views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution.)

The Hallucination of Clean Politics

By Barnes Mawrie

Jennifer Lawrence, the Hollywood actor has rightly observed "We need to tell each other our stories - we need to show that everyone, our neighbours, our families, our community leaders, everyone we know is touched by corruption."

Way back in 1867 Karl Marx published his famous *Das Kapital* where he speaks of a social revolution and the rise of the working class and thereby the emergence of an ideal state where capitalism would give way to socialism in which the working class would rule. In the socialist state there would be total justice and equality. History however has proven that it was wishful thinking, something far from reality. The Soviet Union which adopted such a political philosophy could not last even a century and it collapsed in 1991. As long as we are human beings, we have to live with our limitations and negative inclinations. In short, we humans should never dream of a utopian existence for we are bound to drift into one extreme or the other.

It would be interesting, if someone could show us any government in the world which qualifies as "clean

ally, he is very apt to spread discontent among those who are." This is an existential danger posed by politicians, who claim that they can solve all existing problems and who through their charisma can brainwash the public. When charisma is preferred to character then democracy is on the precipice.

All right-wing political parties that we witness today all over the world, have the same agenda, that is, to topple the governments they call "corrupt" and to claim to be the panacea to all societal maladies. However, in the process they cause more harm and bring in more chaos. The clearest example is what the US has become today under Trump. This right-wing government has accused the Democratic government led by President Joe Biden as "corrupt" and "inefficient" but see what is happening now. In just a few weeks of their governance, they have caused so much political chaos not only at home but in the whole world. Trump and the GOP who had campaigned on Make America Great Again (MAGA) slogan, are achieving just the opposite result. As they say "uncle Sam has become

"Way back in 1867 Karl Marx published his famous Das Kapital where he speaks of a social revolution and the rise of the working class and thereby the emergence of an ideal state where capitalism would give way to socialism in which the working class would rule. In the socialist state there would be total justice and equality."

and corruption free." Even the western countries like Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Norway, Switzerland and Sweden, qualify only as "least corrupted states" but not "corruption free." We have seen and heard in the media how even the US is steeped in corruption. When it comes to India, we can only feel ashamed about the degree of corruption that exists in our country. Therefore, what I want to say is that it is absolutely humbug to speak of clean politics anywhere in the world and much less in India. We have witnessed how the AAP party came to power on an ideology of "clean politics" but see what it has become today. From being a clean party, it has tainted itself with many corrupt practices and as a consequence it lost in the last assembly election.

Without any malice towards any political party, I am highly amused when people speak of a party that would bring clean politics in Meghalaya. That is wishful thinking or better still a political hallucination. Politicians who campaign on this ideology are in fact hypocrites. We have heard such vain speeches ad nauseam. I recall here the quote from H. L. Mencken who remarked "The most dangerous man to any state is the man who thinks things out for himself, without regard to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. Almost inevitably he comes to the conclusion that the government he lives under is dishonest, insane and intolerable, and so, if he is romantic, he tries to change it. And even if he is not romantic person-

uncle Scrooge." So frankly speaking, I do not believe in the "clean politics" slogan but I would be more inclined to believe in the "better politics" slogan. I pity that section of the public who are easily duped into accepting such a false ideology. It is my opinion that no political party and no politician has the moral mandate of claiming to be "clean" or "corruption-free." Corruption in politics has become a systemic virus or an institutional sin that no politician can escape its influence.

We have seen so many good willed politicians who entered clean into the system but they always came out soiled on the other side. All we can do is to choose the lesser evil, to vote for a party that we think can deliver better than others. But to harbour under the assumption of having a "clean" and "corruption free" party is like expecting a leopard to change its spots. To adapt the words of Theodore Roosevelt to our Indian context "when they call the roll in the Parliament, the MPs do not know whether to answer 'Present' or 'Not Guilty'." This is basically because humans are limited beings who are easily lured by wealth and power and they will easily sacrifice principles for personal gain. So, I would conclude by saying "do not hope for ideal governments for there is no such thing as clean politics." Let me end my arguments on a humorous tone with the quote from Mehmet Murat Ildan "instead of politicians, let the monkeys govern the countries; at least they will steal only the bananas!"

Letters to the Editor

Challenges of low revenue

Editor,
I'm sure many of us were not surprised by the results of the ADC elections to the Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills. However, "seeing is believing," as someone said. We have seen the campaigns on social media platforms before the election where VPP supporters were shown upbeat and supporting their candidates at public meetings. This result was indeed one of the most awaited in recent times for us Meghalayan voters. Now that they have a single party majority in KHADC my thoughts on this are actually a reminder to the VPP who will be leading the Council and is expected to walk the talk.

Therefore the VPP whose long term vision is to capture the government after the 2028 Assembly elections, should keep in mind how to handle some of the challenges we are facing in our State clearly due to low revenue generation. In Meghalaya we are fully reliant on Central Government Funds for about 80% as the State revenue is covered up to only 14%. Hence, Meghalaya's heavy reliance on central government funds, with only a small portion of its revenue generated internally, creates several difficulties. Here's a breakdown of the key challenges:
Fiscal vulnerability: A high dependence on central funds makes the state's finances susceptible to changes in central government policies

and allocations. This lack of financial autonomy can hinder long-term planning and development. When a state is heavily reliant on outside funding, it can hamper sustainable growth.
Limited development capacity: Insufficient internal revenue restricts the state's ability to invest in crucial development projects, such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare. This can impede economic growth and limit opportunities for the state's residents.
Debt trap risk: To bridge the revenue gap, the state may resort to borrowing, leading to a potential debt trap. This occurs when a state must borrow more money simply to repay existing debts, thereby creating a dangerous cycle.

The CAG report has highlighted this danger.
Challenges in revenue generation: Meghalaya faces challenges in expanding its revenue base. This could be due to factors like:
A) Limited industrialization.
B) Geographical constraints.
C) Challenges in tax collection.
Accountability and utilization: Proper utilization of central funds is crucial. Issues like pending utilization certificates can create doubts about the efficient use of resources, potentially affecting future funding.
Economic growth disparity: Reports have shown that Meghalaya has had challenges with economic growth rates, sometimes lagging be-

hind national averages. This can exacerbate the problem of needing outside funding.
In essence, Meghalaya's financial situation necessitates a focus on increasing its internal revenue generation, improving fiscal management, and ensuring the efficient use of available funds. One of our hopes on VPP is to see how these kinds of challenges can be overcome through their hard work and intelligence.
Yours etc.,
Riwanki Suchiang,
Via email

parliamentary election, it was an election marred by a high-pitched election campaign where the main poll plank of some political parties was preservation of the matrilineal system and targeting the leader of one party since his children take his clan name. It didn't work in the parliamentary election and it didn't work this time around also. People who follow the patrilineal system like our family are still a rare breed and it is almost non-existent in rural areas of our state. Academically this is a fascinating topic. It was Friedrich Engels who first proposed the theory that early human kinship was matrilineal; this theory was unanimously supported by anthropologists in the 19th century. Then in the 20th century this theory was

discarded as not being universally true and in recent years some geneticists and paleo-anthropologists have found genetic evidence that early human kinship might have been matrilineal after all.
A year or so ago, I stumbled upon a video of a leading Native American activist talking fondly about the matrilineal system. I later found out that most Native American tribes used to or are still following the matrilineal system. Native Americans are said to have migrated from Asia thousands of years ago and culturally and genetically they do have ties with the people of Siberia and Mongolia; they follow the matrilineal system and have lived for thousands of years in isolation. This might be a solid reason to

believe the theory that early human kinship was matrilineal. As far as our society is concerned, oral tradition has it that we once followed the patrilineal system but changed to a matrilineal system because men were constantly engaged in warfare. Academically this theory is also pointed to by scholars as one of the reasons why some communities end up adopting the matrilineal system.
Politically this issue is definitely going to resurface come the next elections.
Yours etc.,
Gary Marbanian,
Via email

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

"The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable."

—James A. Garfield

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 196 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2025

Oligarchy at work

THE projection of the nation's growth to a \$5trillion economy and hopes of it being a super power by year 2047 marking the century of India's Independence are often met with cynicism. The ground realities project a different picture. India's growth since Independence and more so after the liberalization since the early 1990s benefited just 10 percent of what is now a 1.40 billion population. The 20 percent forming the middle class marginally benefited and the rest 70 per cent are satisfied with crumbs in the form of free ration, subsidies, doles and other welfare steps. A prominent agency doing periodic analysis of market trends has come up with a report that testifies to this.

Worse, the scenario is steadily deteriorating as far as the cause of social uplift is concerned. The report says India has been getting increasingly more unequal, with the top 10 per cent holding about 58 per cent of the national income, compared to their share of 34 per cent in 1990 – about the time the economic Liberalization started. The strategies adopted during the past 35 years – or nearly half the term since Independence – made the poor poorer and the rich richer. Curiously, Prime Minister Modi and his team are silent on such reversals of the ordinary man's fortunes. The report also notes that the rich benefited more in the post Covid-19 phase, while the middle class and the poor got a raw deal from governmental management of the economy, resulting in a situation in which they largely lost the purchasing power. Homes that can afford to make ends meet now constitute 18 per cent of the population compared with 40 per cent five years ago. Salaries have hardly increased in the past over 10 years, with Covid-19 cited as the excuse by the private sector while governmental staff or the bureaucracy manage to have regular pay hikes and extract more benefits from the government through multiple means. Signs of an oligarchy running the affairs of the nation under different shades and through the system of a manipulated 'democracy' are all too pronounced.

As the report notes, India's consuming class is not widening as much as it is "deepening" – meaning the rich are becoming richer while the number of the rich is not growing. In real terms, those who can afford to liberally do purchases form only some 14 crores of the 1.4 billion population. The rest lead a hand-to-mouth existence, tightening their belts, or are remaining poor, weak and famished. Whether the saffron drum-beaters that keep mouthing the "Bharat Mahaan" slogan and doing much less to uplift the disadvantaged, being mindful of such ground realities, is a big question. Failure to create more job opportunities, harness the productive forces and invoke their inner energy --and instead feeding them with crumbs – means the goal of India becoming a developed nation will remain a mirage.

VPP must initiate process of driving the Council on the right track

By Patricia Mukhim

First things first: There is a quantum jump from electoral promises to delivery. We have been victims of unfulfilled electoral promises for decades that we have now turned cynical. However, since hope springs eternal in the human breast we hope to see the promises made at every election campaign come to fruition.

Indeed, the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) won the KHADC election solely on the promise of change. The issues raised by the VPP were hyperlocal except for flagging the non-issue of demanding Article 371 which was explained away to the people saying that it would reduce or even do away with

(jingshongshit) that even after results were announced and respective candidates had won the elections their supporters got into slugfests and scuffles. One would have thought that with time people would have matured and voted with reason and some commonsense but that was not to be. With each election public frenzy seems to have got over the top.

That said, the parties that won the election must be congratulated and given a chance to prove themselves. Many have said that the elections to the ADCs are a forerunner of the 2028 State assembly

houses much of the solid waste that flows from the Umkhrah River. The ADC and the Dorbar Shnong need to sit and thrash out this issue taking on board concerned citizens too and come up with a viable road map.

Rivers under threat: The state of our rivers both in Khasi and Jaintia Hills should make us weep. But most citizens don't seem to care. There are those who have crafted poems and sang dirges to their favourite rivers but have not lifted a hand to help redeem these rivers from their present state. Rivers have become

on this issue and also have the political spine to show that they mean business and will not allow the culture of "leh latba mon" (go as you please) under their watch.

Stone quarrying sand banking; coal & limestone mining: This is a very ticklish issue and people have learnt to argue that the above activities create livelihoods and therefore cannot be regulated. This is not acceptable. The Councils are custodians of forests and land and forests are what protect our top soil which is flowing down our deforested lands. Do we know that it takes 1000 years to create one inch of top soil? If we knew that would be have been so careless about allowing our



the Acts of Parliament unless the State Government ratified such acts. Sometimes politicians contesting the elections to the ADCs in their eagerness to win votes seem to be sending a message to the voting public that the Constitution does not exist or that the Sixth Schedule is beyond the purview of the Constitution when in fact the 6th Schedule is born out of the Indian Constitution.

Environment the biggest casualty:

The most immediate issue of concern is the environmental degradation that could soon turn this state which once boasted of having the highest rainfall in the world into a desert. This is what a study by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) suggests. There are huge climatic changes experienced in Meghalaya and the North Eastern Region which is a biodiversity hotspot. Climate change is going to impact this region faster than it will other parts of India yet this issue did not figure at all during the run-up to the elections because our people don't have the appetite to hear harsh truths. They prefer to listen to blandishments of rival politicians and boastful paeans of those they support. Such is the excitement

elections. And that's only to be expected because the overarching ambition of every political party is to rule the state. The aspiration of the VPP moreover is to cleanse the Augean stables which have been littered with corruption over time. But for now the VPP has to deliver on several fronts in the KHADC.

Garbage the biggest menace for the KHADC to tackle:

The KHADC has passed the Solid Waste Management Act in the last Executive Council. This is a huge responsibility which even the State Government seems to have failed to deal with. The quest for a landfill has been a misadventure with village after village refusing to cede with land for the purpose and no one can blame them if Marten is the example of a landfill gone horribly wrong. The fact that the State Government has till date not been able to find any competent waste manager to deal with the legacy waste at Marten itself suggests that things are not going to be easy. The new EC at the KHADC needs to sit and thrash out this matter first and find solutions because the issue of garbage needs to be resolved and fast before the Umiam Lake turns into a garbage dump. It already

sewage receptacles and garbage dumps. This raises the question of culture. Does the Khasi-Jaintia culture not have any aphorisms on how to keep our rivers clean and pristine as we inherited them from our ancestors? Our foremothers in fact drank from rivers around them. Do we dare drink water from our rivers today? Yet when a river tries to clean the rivers not a single MLA or MDC would come and join in the cleaning drive. I guess they feel its beneath their dignity to wade into the rivers and pull out the garbage like the young people who are part of the cleaning drive have to do from time to time. Can we expect the VPPMDCs to join in such river cleaning drives and to also drive the agenda in their Council on how to work at (a) taking penal action against those Dorbar Shnong that cannot prevent cars from being washed in the rivers flowing through their shnong (b) those that build homes on the river and let their sewage pipes flow into the river. After all, Dorbar Shnong cannot enjoy only powers without responsibility. The practice of washing cars in the river is a crime that deserves severe punishment and the ADCs had better come up with stringent laws

top soil to flow downstream to Bangladesh because of our rapidly shrinking forest cover? And why should Meghalaya deplete its natural resources and sell its boulders and limestone to Bangladesh? Why this great rush to extract everything from this earth only for a few people to get rich quick? Can the KHADC come up with stricter laws and upscale its forest protection force? In the past those employed as forest guards in the ADCs made money by looting the forests. We hope the VPP will stop this murder of our most precious resources – our carbon sinks that also provide us with the gift of life – oxygen.

Need for convergence:

One of the downsides of having too many tiers of governance is that the institutions all work in silos. The ADCs don't share data or sit with the State Government departments in a bid to address common issues such as forests and environment conservation, water conservation and garbage management. In fact, the ADCs, State Government departments and the Dorbar Shnong each have to craft out a definite roadmap in saving the environment. The time is now and we await to see the VPP taking the lead in this life-saving mission.

The LGBTQIA+ Community in Meghalaya: A Call for Compassion

By Glenn C. Kharkongor

In 2019, I attended a conference on Gender, Religion, and Human Sexuality, conducted by the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI). A woman colleague, from the Centre for Gender at MLCU attended the conference along with me. We both learned much, especially from the sessions on multiple genders. Each of these sessions was conducted by representatives from diverse gender communities.

Also in attendance were a few LGBTQIA+ individuals from the Northeast. They told us that they were not supported by tribal society, and could not express their chosen lifestyles. Their experiences were in sharp contrast to LGBTQIA+ persons in states like Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, who had social support systems and enlightened government schemes.

In Karnataka, transgenders can avail government financial assistance for sex reassignment surgery. In 2021, Karnataka became the first state in India to reserve jobs in public employment for transgender persons, and provides them with free counselling and legal aid. In Tamil Nadu, transgender people can access free housing, various citizenship documents, admission in government colleges with a full scholarship for higher studies, and to income-generation programs.

Prejudice and apathy in Meghalaya

In our state, LGBTQIA+ persons live under the radar, afraid of societal condemnation. Every now and then, social media is abuzz with vilification of some apparent wrongdoing by a gay or lesbian person. Some of the gifted gay and lesbian musicians in the Khasi community express themselves through their music. They have small informal groups of like-lifestyle persons, all the while taking care not to be visible.

There are signs that government neglect of this community may change. In late 2024, a protection cell for transgender individuals was set up in West Khasi Hills. The Youth Policy, 2021, has a mere mention of transgenders in the section on inclusion. Clearly much more needs to be done in our state.

Homosexuality and the church

Much of the prejudice against the LGBTQIA+ comes from some conservative churches, who at best may preach about loving the sinner but hating the sin. In an article titled, Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin, Caravan magazine reported the response of a mainline church in the Northeast to the striking down of Article 377 by the Delhi High Court, thus affirming LGBT rights.

While there was considerable celebration among human-rights activists and the gender minorities, the church wrote to the Central Government saying, "Homosexuality is against all religious ethics and the culture of Indian society. We feel that the Indian society is safeguarded by the IPC section 377 from unnatural and anti-social behaviour." The synod argued that homosexuality threatened the very basis of the family structure and that it is "against the natural order". The same church broke up with its counterpart church in the USA, over the ordination of gay ministers.

There are many churches that support the LGBT community. The Church of South India (CSI), United Methodist Church, USA, Church of England, and the Church of Scotland, are among those that ordain LGBT persons. Many churches support civil marriages among their members. In 2023, the Vatican approved a landmark ruling to allow Roman Catholic priests to administer blessings to same-sex couples.

National Council of Churches in India (NCCI)

From time to time the NCCI has conducted conclaves and workshops on the issue of LGBTs, and has periodically issued statements. The NCCI has taken the view that homosexuality is "a natural or genetic reality", and has stated that the rest of the Christian world needed to "rethink" the stated position that homosexuality is a sin against God.

According to Rev. Christopher Rajkumar, the secretary

of the Justice, Peace and Creation Commission of the NCCI, it is the duty of the church to inform the common people that homosexuality is a natural process. "Blind opposition to homosexuality amounts to human rights violation," he said, adding that a rethink is needed in Christian theology to embrace homosexuals into its fold.

In 2010, after a two-year study project, engaging with churches and friends from the LGBT community, the NCCI issued "An Ecumenical Document of Human Sexuality". The preamble says, "Churches in general have not addressed the issue of sexuality. We need to teach the subject of sexuality with more positive and affirming messages. Since all human beings are created in the image of God, we need to discern this image in all...go beyond our traditional faith perspective to evolve a mature understanding of the issues related to sex, and to help us embrace neglected and discriminated persons."

Clause 3 of the document avers that "Sexuality is essentially relational and has pluriform expressions", and that "sexuality is an indispensable dimension of all human development and life and is as complex and diverse as the human population. Sexuality is pluriform, ambiguous, and fluid." Clause 4 states that "Sexuality can be distorted. This distorted concept of sexuality is underpinned by culture, theology, and the judgemental moralizing of the church." The NCCI has also issued a document urging its member churches to "accompany the People with Different Sexual Orientation (PDSO) in their journey" and to protect the human rights and dignity of such people. The forum proposed "re-reading and re-interpreting scriptures from the PDSO perspective".

Multiple genders are natural

Of the global population, 10-11% identify themselves under LGBTQIA+ categories. This would mean that they would be more than 3-4 lakh such persons in our society. Among Generation Z, 19.7% say they are LGBT. Among the Native Americans, many tribes regard LGBT persons as having "two spirits", and at least 40 tribes accept same-sex marriages. They are granted special status in the community as ceremonial leaders and healers.

Multiple genders are the norm in plants. The avocado tree flowers twice in a season, firstly female, and secondly male. The Khasi pine tree has both male and female cones. The male cones are on the lower and female cones are on the upper branches. This is to prevent the pollen from falling on the female cones of the same tree. This promotes fertilisation with other pine trees, which enhances genetic variation. LGBTQIA+ is normal in animals. According to World Wildlife, over 1,500 animal species engage in same-sex sexual behaviour, which can help maintain the health of a species population. In fact, same-sex behaviours are more common than heterosexual practices. Some animals can change sexes or be a combination of various sexes.

Compassion

Psalms 139:13 says, For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

Matt 19: 12 explains some of the forms of gender, "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it." More than science, and apart from theology, all individuals, irrespective of their sexuality, deserve tolerance, respect and compassion. LGBT individuals invariably experience stigma, abandonment by families, bullying, rape and often murder. They have high rates of mental illness and suicide. Within our own community, they live in secrecy and fear. Somehow, many of us are not able to embrace them with love. A few years ago, the principal of a theological seminary spoke at MLCU on World Peace Day. He spoke inclusively and compassionately about the multiple genders in our community. We need more such voices.

Letters to the Editor

Phan Nonglait Park

Editor,
The other day I heard some preposterous news (which I hope is just hearsay) that the authorities concerned are mulling (or maybe have decided) to do away with the Phan Nonglait (formerly Lady Hydari) park. The narrative goes that it is being proposed to utilize the space for extension of the Civil Hospital on one end and expansion of the Pine Mount School on the other. More surprising is that the remaining space would be utilised for construction of a shopping mall.

If this is true it would really be a sad day for the city of Shillong and its people. Globally, town/city planners are desperately trying to maintain the lungs of a city and even creating more new green spots in urban areas but we, in Shillong would be doing away not only with a picturesque heritage site but a vital lung of the city as well as an attractive tourist destination not to mention that the Phan Nonglait park was renamed after the first woman freedom fighter from the Khasi Hills.

I sincerely hope that I

have simply heard gossip and that Shillong can rest in its beauty, that is the Phan Nonglait (Lady Hydari) park.
Yours etc.,
Carl Rangad,
Via email

On political corruption

Editor,
The special article "Hallucination of Clean Politics" by Barnes Mawrie (ST February 27, 2025) is excellent with intriguing content. Mawrie has touched on everything right from Marx, end of Union of Soviet Socialist Republic, least corrupt Nordic States, Luxembourg and Switzerland, the present-day United States of America and corruption in India and concluding his captivating material with a quote from a Turkish playwright, novelist, and thinker. Born on May 16, 1965, in Elazığ Turkey is well known for his thought-provoking plays, captivating novels, and insightful aphorisms. "Instead of politicians, let the monkeys govern the countries; at least they will steal only the bananas!" a satirical commentary on political corruption. By suggesting that monkeys would only steal bananas, lldan humor-

ously implies that politicians often engage in more significant and harmful corruption. This quote reflects his critical view of political leaders and their actions, highlighting the need for integrity and accountability in governance.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Mother Language Day

Editor,
Apropos of the article, "Celebrating Mother Language Day" by Bianca Nongkynrih (ST, February 21, 2025), given that one language dies every 14 days as powerful groups impose their languages on speakers of less common languages, the International Mother Language Day gives us a much needed opportunity to think about it. The imposition of a dominant language on people with a different language (linguistic imperialism) is a symptom of a disease that can cause long term problems and hinder a country's progress. There is no room for the 'one nation one language' policy in a multilingual democratic country like India.

Bangladesh's liberation against Pakistan's language imperialism has given us

many lessons. First, it refutes the two-nation theory of Savarkar and Jinnah and shows that language imposition cannot be swept under the carpet of religious fraternity. Second, it proves that India's three language policy is a right step in the right direction. On the other hand, a liberal language policy helps Belgium achieve peace and prosperity. Belgium has recognised Flemish, French, and German as their official languages even though German speakers constitute a small minority of the population to effectively solve their internal strife.

They solved the language conflict by implementing a federal system, dividing the country into distinct linguistic regions with significant autonomy, where Dutch (Flemish) is spoken in the north, French (Walloon) in the south, and a bilingual Brussels capital, effectively allowing each language community to govern its own affairs while maintaining a unified national government. It has been ensured that there would be equal representation for both Dutch and French speakers in the federal government.

Having thus solved its language problem, Belgium

has attained an enviable position in the Human Development Index. Between 1990 and 2025, Belgium's HDI value increased from 0.806 to 0.942 and now it stands at the 12th position out of 193 countries. We should learn from Belgium how peace and prosperity are directly proportional to liberal language policy. If India wants to better its 134th rank in the HDI, it has to take many measures. A liberal language policy is certainly one of them.

India also needs to follow the language model of the United States of America. In spite of being at the top of technologically advanced countries, the USA falls back on ballot paper voting to root out any suspicion of foul play stemming from voting through EVM. Interestingly, these ballot papers are available in all major languages of a state, depending on its demography. While a voter in New York can choose a ballot paper in Bengali instead of English, Chinese, Spanish, and Korean, voters in Illinois can opt for a ballot paper printed in Hindi. It also shows how a democratic country should honour the mother tongue of even those voters who have origins in different countries.

The Reserve Bank of India needs to take a cue from the American election. As per the 2011 language census, states like West Bengal, along with southern and northeastern States, are not Hindi-speaking and have adopted English as a secondary language. As a resident of Bengal the RBI messaging in Hindi is unacceptable. I could infer that these SMS messages were about on-line fraud prevention, but I struggled to understand the instructions. If the RBI has to use Hindi, it should stick to India's three language policy by sending SMS first in the primary language of the State, then in English, and at the end in Hindi for non-Hindi speaking States.

The Centre needs to follow the language policy of Belgium and the USA. Extra care needs to be taken to see to it that there is not a single attempt to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking states.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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