

"A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is reality." — Yoko Ono

The Shillong Times

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Saga of Sisodia

THE saga of Manish Sisodia is a commentary on the state of the nation today. The Delhi deputy chief minister, arrested in connection with the CBI investigations into the Delhi Liquor Scam, is moving heaven and earth to prove he is innocent and yet being subjected to harassment. The Supreme Court has washed its hands of his plea for extrication from the case, and proposed that he should rather move the trial court or the Delhi high court with such a plea. Arvind Kejriwal and Sisodia are the torch-bearers of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), an offshoot of the 2011 anti-corruption movement that made waves in Delhi and captured the imagination of the nation in spectacular ways. Now, the AAP leadership must explain as to how it has reached such a pass in an obvious contradiction of the ideology it upheld. This is serious matter.

As a matter of fact, the AAP government headed by Kejriwal has earned a good name for the way it stood by the common man in Delhi, avoiding to raise taxes and yet implementing a lot of developmental projects there at relatively lower costs. It claims to have avoided cuts/commissions or acceptance of bribes in relation to these projects. Even on the election chessboard, the party emerged winner time and again in Delhi and recently grabbed power in Punjab. Starkly, the Delhi Liquor scam is about alleged receipt of gratification from the liquor lobby — of around Rs 40 crore — via tweaking the new liquor policy for Delhi. This money was likely for use in the party's Goa assembly polls campaign. The AAP vehemently denies the allegation and insists its aim to redraft the liquor policy was to facilitate more earnings to the state exchequer. Truth could be the first casualty.

When the CBI acts, especially against those opposed to the ruling BJP at the Centre, it is natural that many smell a rat. The apex court had itself termed the central investigation agency a "caged parrot", meaning its actions are based on the whims and fancies of the central government. CBI is not an independent entity like the judiciary; it is an arm of the Union Home Ministry. The CBI mostly generally targets those against whom the Modi government has an axe to grind; and the opposition parties and their leaders are sitting ducks. Yet, corruption is rampant, and AAP leaders should not be encouraged or condoned if they have erred. Fighting elections requires money, but that by itself is not an excuse. That the AAP took money is still in the realm of suspicion. It is up to the CBI to prove it.

2023 sees little change in our fortunes

By Albert Thyrianiang

This time this author voted at Rangblang Substation of Mawklyvat constituency in South West Khasi Hills. Earlier my vote was in the "push" Laitumkhrah locality in Shillong city. On earlier occasions my civil duty was just flying visits as one had to rush back to the call of duty soon after voting. Even the basic biotada of the candidates were not studied let alone spending time in any sort of engagement in the neighbourhood. 2023 was sort of different. I reached my ancestral home three days prior to the polling date spending time 'spying' on the locality and the village. The affidavits of the candidates too were scrutinised. Among the seven candidates only three are graduates. Two are class Eight passed; one has passed class 10 while the other has cleared class 12. There are cruxpoints, the richest among them is the UDP's Renkion Lyngdoh Tongkhar with Rs 9 crore making him one of the richest politicians in one of the poorest constituencies in the state.

Rangblang Substation or simply Rangblang is a village of about 300 households. Most of them survive on meagre farming. Only the grand St. Mary's Higher Secondary School and the Church adjacent to it stand out. Concrete houses are seen in some locations. The majority live in the humblest of homes. Electorally there are 567 male and 537 female voters taking the electorate to 1104. There are two dilapidated water tanks built atop 'U Lum ling Manc Rim' (hills on which the first church of the village stood about 40 years ago) for the village. Not once did water flow through them. Now they are either rusted or broken to pieces. People either carry water from natural sources or those who can afford have installed their own pumps to ease the trouble of carrying the essential commodity on their heads or shoulders.

On polling day I also visited two other stations in the area. The common complaint is 'ngim dom um. Ngi baw let ngim um sha jing' (we have no water. We have to fetch water from a distance). Some villagers revealed that no effort was made to bring water supply to their homes. Others showed the exact replica of the Rangblang

model. One wonders why the state government has not implemented the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) that provides Functional Household Tap Connection (FHTC) to every rural household. The other grievances are bad and poor electricity supply, unavailability of educational institutions right from the primary level and poor toilet facilities. One serious criticism is on the health front. There is only

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one hospital in Mawklyvat in the entire district. Allegations abound that the centre was hurriedly opened. All the other essential equipment for a functional hospital are still absent. For most ailments patients have to traverse to Shillong on rough and dusty roads. Most are shocked to hear that the representative has not done well at all in the last five years. The above 'findings' are moderately documented in 'You Tube, the "The Albert Voices".

A video on the dilapidated water tanks and broken pipes was not welcomed by most watchers. There are those who resent that a 'person like me' should get involved in politics. Some even hint that my category of citizens should have no part in playing a 'dirty' game. A response is perhaps beneficial.

The work of the Church and politics (government) is almost a carbon copy. The Government's work is the upliftment of the people — social and economic. This is exactly the work of the Church too. That is the reason why the Church runs education institutions, hospitals, other health facilities, social work centres and others. We can say that the primary work of the Church is spiritual and religious development but politics is not alien to this human dimension. Governments have to give religious freedom to all citizens

to churches and residences of priests, pastors, 'ki Rangbah Balang', 'ki Thyminen Bhasan' and others. One of the Church's duties is to teach ethics and morality to its followers. Has the Church done enough in the last one month? It is presumed, the Church teaches that accepting money for vote is wrong. But why such an impact of money in every constituency? Christian candidates don't give a damn to the instructions of the Church. They distributed cash liberally. The faithful too cheer over it. They make merry in rallies and election venues over cash and freebies. They pocket an amount on voting day. They don't hesitate to commit this wrong action. If the church does not influence its members at such a time, then what is its relevance? There is no merit in being a leader in good times.

There is a reason for the loss of this authority. Specifically speaking, every candidate tried to please the church leaders in this election. They gifted significant amounts to every church. MLAs sanctioned schemes at the farm and of them for churches. The public know this. Therefore, leaders have no more credibility to warn the electorate to refrain from accepting favours from candidates before election.

The intermediate road from Nongstoin to Wakhajo that runs through Rangblang is in progress. My grudge against pressure groups, particularly the KSI, is that this particular road which was to be a two-lane road, was stalled for no valid reason 7 years ago. Why should the Rangblang-Wakhajo area be denied a two-lane road just because there is uranium in the vicinity? Uranium can be ferried on a single lane road too. Injustice and discrimination have been done for a long time. A word about the much published 'chicken and piglet' scheme as part of the Focus programme! Whether it is a loan or a government scheme, the intention of the project was merely to attract voters. I know for a fact that most of the animals died because the government did not provide feed. Food is expensive. A benefactor told me that a sack of food that last for two weeks costs Rs. 2,600 and therefore Rs. 5,200 a month. As she could not afford the feed her birds and help the poor but from where will they get Rs. 88.6 every month? A government that does not foresee this simple logic is worthless.

Our hopes are not endless. 2023 too is not expected to change the fortunes of Rangblang or of the whole state. According to feedback the day of money on February 27 and the days leading to the 'D-Day' has reached an all-time high. Ever seasoned politician, Bindo Lanong is shocked that 75 per cent of voters demand money before casting their votes. The 25 per cent are clueless. In my polling station there are allegations that a candidate of a political party poured Rs. one crore. The respected MLA did anything in the last five years but the flow of cash could get him through. The cash for vote is a shameless act but who cares? We pride in calling ourselves 'Ka Jaijymnaw, kaba tip brawit tip' (I do God's work) but we see nothing wrong in receiving cash from a candidate on election mode. Our second priority identity is that we are Christians. We consider ourselves better than adherents of other religions but we welcome ill-gotten money that comes

Primary Education ASER report not encouraging

By Dhrujan Mukherjee

Primary education in the country is neglected as the States do not have the resources to invest in schools and upgrade their standards. Though there has been some increase in budgetary allocation, experts believe that both school education and higher education will stagnate and may actually decline in real terms. If inflation is taken into account, there has been a paltry increase of around Rs. 13,000 crore from the current fiscal year with about Rs. 39,000 crore set aside for the National Education Mission.

This comes at a time when there is an imperative to spread education in villages and also improve its quality after the learning losses suffered during the Covid-19 pandemic. While 100 SG labs are proposed to be established, one such lab in each sub division or at least in 100 colleges, should have been taken up. What plans the government has for the aspirational schools programme are not known and has not been announced in the Finance Minister's budget speech. Also, how the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) would be developed as centres of excellence is missing in the budget speech. The financial allocation to develop these centres of excellence as of now could be viewed as jargon given that a concrete plan is not spelt out.

However, the promise of recruiting 38,000 teachers and support staff in the next three years for 740 Elementary Model Residential Schools, serving 3.5 lakh students, appears quite encouraging. Experts expect that more such schools should have been opened in each subdivision, if not each block, should get one such school. At least some initiative by the Centre to the States to open one such school in each subdivision on a financial arrangement of 30:70 basis would have helped greatly in upgrading school education.

The recently released Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) found that gender disparity prevails in education as there is a tendency to invest more in educating their sons. There are many States where girls' enrolment still languished at every level by over 10 percent. In Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Needless to say, enrolment does not mean attendance. ASER found that attendance at government schools to dip from 88.6 percent in Tamil Nadu to under 60 percent in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Any figure under 75 percent found in twelve States suggests habitual absence, dropouts, or ghost enrolments. Teachers are missing as well, sometimes because they play truant, chiefly on way to unaffordable posts. In 2020, there were 17.1 percent vacancy positions across India, 57.5 percent in Sikkim and around 40 percent in Jharkhand and Bihar and it is believed that the situation has worsened today.

Delving into the report, which based its findings on 2021 data, it was found that most States experienced large learning losses during the pandemic. However, once schools reopened, States made a concerted effort to build or re-build foundational competencies, which has resulted in a partial and in some cases, a full recovery. While the last few rounds of ASER did not capture the state of foundational learning, it is understood that the government conducted a study through the NCERT in 2022 to find out whether students were picking up basic skills on literacy and numeracy. The NCERT report found that as many as 37 percent of students enrolled in Class III have very limited foundational numeracy skills such as identifying numbers and carrying out simple mathematical operations, while even the most basic knowledge is absent in 11 per cent learners.

The National Education Policy (NEP) speaks of "economically suboptimal and operationally complex schools" — translated, those in remote areas with relatively few students. The People's Archive of Rural India in a report about rural communities in Odisha, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh termed them as guinea-pig states for the acronym-happy Union government's SAT programme. Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital, People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) report that under Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital Education (SATHE), nearly 9000 sub-schools were shut down in Odisha. From an uncler and undated Niti Aayog report, the tally seems to be 20,000 in MP and 4,000 in Jharkhand.

This being the state of primary education, there is a serious need to investigate the condition of schools in the backward districts of the country. Quality of education needs to be improved for which there has to be a sufficient number of teachers and their attendance has to be strictly monitored, either by the panchayats or voluntary organisations. The infrastructure of schools needs to be revamped. It goes without saying that only concentrating in metros and big towns will not help; the rural schools have to be upgraded.

Business houses, whether in the public or private sector, need to be encouraged and each of these should be asked to take up one or two schools in their area of operation for upgradation. Even non-teaching professions should be motivated to run schools, if necessary, with panchayats. The States lack financial resources to take up the task of school upgradation and, as such, financial resources must be made available from the Centre, or a rural school education grant for at least one school in every block.

For all this to happen, a special kind of action is possibly needed with experts on an all-India level. The attendance of teachers, their capability of teaching, the regularity of their presence of students and, last but not the least, financial requirement of each subdivision in Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Also, the possible funding option has to be found out.

There are many ways of running schools with good and dedicated teachers at low cost. Apart from part-time teachers, retired professional and voluntary organisations could be used to teach and run schools. Even religious organisations should be motivated to set up schools in remote areas. Government support should be extended, if there is sincerity and zeal to impart education to children, it would be easy to get teachers at a very low cost. However, the school education should not be allowed to be polluted by political interference and needs to be run in a professional manner.

What is needed is involvement of educated people across the country, specially in rural areas and small towns to take up the task of imparting education with all sincerity. This is easy to say but, in reality, the implementation of this is not quite easy as in today's social environment politics and corruption has intruded in every institution. Unless there is motivation, it is difficult to witness any change at the grass-roots level though it cannot be put past the government's shoulders with misleading statements about India's changing profile. —/N/A

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Letters to the Editor

Use of pickup trucks to transport passengers

Editor, I, a concerned citizen of Tura, find it to be of utmost importance to raise afresh the issue of illegal transportation of people in goods transport vehicles through your esteemed newspaper. It is unthinkable that the basic road safety rules can be bent if it suits the appropriate authority while the penalties for violating the same rules are being strictly adhered to during other times. It is for everyone to see that passengers can be thrown around the truck bed when hit by another vehicle while they are not restrained by seatbelts. They can be easily ejected due to the sudden stop in a head-on collision. And riding in the back of a truck means passengers are near vehicle exhaust fumes. Dizziness, headache, and vertigo are just a few of the symptoms that can cause serious health issues. A violation of Supreme

Court Order by a competent election authority had taken the precious life of a Tura local. The Supreme Court in 2009 held that passengers were not "authorized" to travel in goods vehicles. But it is unfortunate that there is no proper and best enforcement of the legal provisions. State transport departments just perform the ritual of issuing public notices to comply with the SC orders on road safety. It is to be seen that trucks and small goods vehicles transport passengers for religious programmes and political rallies all the time. But the competent state authority remains a silent spectator and allows the road mishaps to happen.

By highlighting this issue in your well-known newspaper column, I hope to bring the competent election authorities to task for the manner in which they have treated the government servants deputised for election duties. When the transportation of cattle in the back of trucks required to be in conformity with Article 21 read with Article 51(a) and Section 11 of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960

ensuring that all animals are treated with compassion and dignity and are not mistreated with un-penetrable cruelty, is it not for the state to give adequate care for human lives and protect them from any vulnerable situation? It is therefore inhuman to have used trucks to transport election officials and it certainly amounts to cruelty. It is against the spirit of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution that safeguards human and protects life.

The fact is if an official commits any breach of the code of electoral conduct, he is punishable but now the question is if the authority in question is in gross violation of human rights and causes irreparable loss to life or property, who is answerable and what are the penalties?

Yours etc, Sume Chandola Sangma A concerned citizen, Via email

Of Elections and Exams

Editor, In their manifestos, the various political parties in

Meghalaya identified education as a priority area requiring intervention if they were to win the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly elections in 2023. I'd like to remind the various political parties that the MBDFSI SSLC examination 2023 will begin on March 3, 2023. Having said that, I should also mention that after the election results are announced on 2nd March, 2023, there will be various celebrations in the state's various constituencies. We have seen over the years that there is a lot of commotion following the announcement of any election results, with loud celebrations lasting well into the early hours of the morning. This is bound to create some disturbance for our students who are appearing or are going to appear for the Huald examinations. Hence, this is an appeal to the various political parties and their candidates to first empathize with our students before attempting to mobilize their lofty ideas embodied in their election manifestos. Please create the right and conducive atmosphere for our students appearing for

their board exams and ensure that the enthusiastic supporters refrain from creating any ruckus on March 2, 2023.

Dr David Feral Marbaning Via email

How secret is the secret ballot?

Editor, The letter "A Secret ballot actually Secret," which appeared in your local daily (ST Feb 26, 2023) and written by Marbaning Rymbai is really prescient. The apprehensions as mentioned experienced by our students in our country and with our political parties before and after the various State Legislative Assemblies are real. Now since we have all exercised our franchise on the 27th February 2023 for our Meghalaya Legislative Assembly we hope that our ballots are secret. The ECI ensures safety of EVM right from counting day and up to a period of 45 days from

the date of declaration of the results. The boxes are under the custody of the District Election Officer as part of Election Commission's Standard operating procedure and also there is an Election Petition (EP) period. Various questions that may arise in the minds of the voter have been narrated elaborately by Mr Rymbai. Therefore the District Election Officer must take necessary steps to ensure that the voter's vote is secret and not leaked out otherwise the powerful and established politicians may take advantage and seek recourse to vengeance on those who did not support him/her.

Once again congratulate Mr Rymbai for speaking his mind through the letter and hope for better steps if not already taken by the authorities concerned.

Yours etc, S.L. Singhania, Via email

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*"The superior man thinks always of virtue; the common man thinks of comfort."*  
—Confucius

**The Shillong Times**

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**Meghalaya's Day of Reckoning**  
POLITICS makes strange bedfellows. Nowhere is this phrase more appropriate than it is in Meghalaya where political parties with divergent ideologies and interests can quickly get together for a marriage of convenience. The five MLAs who left the Congress in 2021 went and supported the MDA government which had the BJP as a supporting partner. It also goes to show that in Meghalaya a political party is a temporary parking space until politicians find a better, more lucrative space. The fact that such people continue to win elections no matter how many times they change uniforms is also because voters themselves don't care too much about what a political party stands for but are more interested in what the MLAs has delivered especially at the personal level or what the prospective MLA promises to deliver if he/she is elected.

Democracy requires some understanding about the role of political parties and how their ideology influences the decisions they take even in the sphere of governance. India was imagined as a country that is inclusive of all caste, creed and religions. Over the years this accepted belief has undergone a transformation. Under the BJP rule there is an overt and covert attempt to spread the idea that all Indians were Hindus who later converted to different religions and therefore have to be brought back to the original fold. Regional parties are there to counter this attempt to homogenise a hugely diverse population. This is true especially of the tribes of the North Eastern states that are of Tibeto-Burman or Austro-Asiatic origin and have little in common with the "mainstream" Indian culture. It is worrying that a political party backed by an organisation whose aim is to spread the idea of Hindutva meaning one cultural and religious worldview should have gained acceptance in these hill states that on the one hand want to keep out fellow Indians from their areas by instruments like the Inner Line Permit.

The BJP too has played its cards well in the North East and steered clear of elephants in the room namely - religion and the beef ban. And this is what has perhaps attracted more fans in states like Nagaland and Mizoram where Christianity is much more upfront and louder than in the other states. In these states the BJP has reinvented itself as the crusader for development - Vikas, which seems to have struck a chord with the public that has been suffering from huge infrastructural deficits in the last 50 years. Basics such as piped water and electricity have passed them; by half a century. It is the promise of restoration of these basic rights that has captured the imagination of voters. Whether those promises will translate to votes is a matter of conjecture until the results start trickling in. Until then every party is a winner. It's the government formation part that will be interesting to watch.

**Letters to the Editor**

**Thoughtless election Dept**

The issuance of appointment letters by the District Election Department of Jowai was a torture for all polling personnel. They made us sit the whole day in the compound of the District Library Jowai and didn't even provide us with chairs or any refreshments. We had to wait for them to call out our names for the different polling stations. It seems that the Election Department of West Jaintia Hills does not think about the welfare of the polling personnel. Whoever was in charge was really a thoughtless and brainless person. This sort of treatment is disrespectful towards polling personnel. The Returning Officer ought to enquire how the election was conducted in this district. Why can they not think of a better way to issue appointment letters to polling personnel? They could have printed the names of polling parties and pasted those on the wall so that polling personnel can see which polling station they should report to, instead of calling out our names one by one and making us wait the whole day.

**VPP a beacon of hope**

Editor,

I wrote the other day that VPP is a ray of hope. I read an article in the Indian Express the other day where it called the VPP a breath of fresh air. The Congress and other Regional parties in the state have failed us big time. Congress has been the party that has ruled the state for the longest time but there has not been development in the state. What makes the VPP stand out from the crowd is that for the first time in Meghalaya, we have a party which has a large presence of intellectuals. There was hue and cry a few weeks ago when a candidate from the UDP said that this time around we need a Khasi Chief Minister; my view is that the next Chief Minister should be the best man for the job. "The best man for the job" should always be the rule of thumb when it comes to governance.

I saw a video about an intellectual from Singapore highlighting the reasons which enabled Singapore to transform from a third world country to a first world country. The acronym "MHP" which stands for Meritocracy, Pragmatism and Honesty are the three main factors that transformed Singapore according to the intellectual. Some might say that these factors might not necessarily be applicable to Meghalaya; well Meritocracy, Pragmatism and Honesty are universal truths of good governance and they will work in every country in the world. Meritocracy basically means the best man for the job. Pragmatism means imbuing the best values from a set of values and principles; in case of politics it means imbuing the best values of Capitalism and Socialism. The Nordic countries epitomize pragmatism when it comes to good governance and I don't need to say anything about Norway. Honesty can definitely speak for itself.

Someone mentioned the list of candidates who stand out from the rest in this election yesterday in these columns. Well he forgot to mention Professor A J Syngkon, the VPP candidate from Umking. Professor A J Syngkon is a Commerce Professor from NEHU and he also has a PhD in Economics. Who better to handle the economic affairs of the state than him? Meghalaya right now desperately needs a man who has a grasp of economics and someone who can handle the economy. The previous Chief Minister who has an MBA degree also held the post of Finance Minister in the last government. The previous government appointed a large number of consultants; I would just like to say that a government is not a corporation and corporatisation of governance poses a threat to the economic stability of our state.

Meghalaya desperately needs change. I remember

**Who bothers to improve the New Shillong Township**

By Louis Pynogpe

It is mandatory for the Government of the day or the incoming government to plan our new Shillong to the level that it becomes free from all the defects of the old Shillong. It is a clear indication that our existing Government is randomly allocating land for construction of the Legislative Assembly building, Reid Chest Hospital, etc., without following a master plan for the New Shillong Township. As of now, New Shillong is still at an unplanned stage and it is natural for us to anticipate that it will continue growing organically without any constraint on its growth and ultimately it will be exactly like the Old Shillong with all the defects of an unplanned city. If we start planning and implementing, it is still not late even if any new additions to the Master Plan were done without proper thought and planning.

Government must be far-sighted enough to invest on infrastructure by purchasing adequate land to construct an international airport, a state University, State of the art Stadium and Gymnasium with provision for Hyclele racing, a Botanical Garden where there should be different varieties of rare and exotic flowers with medicinal roots and plants, an Agricultural University, State of the Art Museum and separate units for Science and Technology, State of the Art Medical College, Zoo or Safari, etc. With its scenic beauty, the New Shillong should be exceptionally beautiful and not difficult to fulfil all the criteria of a Smart city. It is important to construct at least two to three State of the Art children's parks with Water Sports facilities in them and parking areas for the safety and security of the vehicles. There should be a standard museum for exhibiting museum pieces with provision for future expansion. May I also state that we need parks for different age categories and the one for training divers be constructed with nominal fees for membership to children, young boys, girls and adults. The one for training divers be constructed with nominal fees for membership to children, young boys, girls and adults. The one for training divers be constructed with nominal fees for membership to children, young boys, girls and adults.

The traffic jam in Shillong is a very serious concern; it will deter tourists from visiting our state. The traffic jam will not be worth the facilities available to them. No efforts were made by the past and existing governments to solve these problems by building flyovers. Further, the electronics traffic signal system is the best tool to regulate traffic in various parts of the world but it was not where it was withdrawn after running for a brief period. As educated citizen we are also responsible for blindly accepting the traffic signal without understanding why this technology failed in

our state. This technology is still accepted with pride even by advanced civilisations of the world. We fear further that with the sets of legislators that we have or our legislators with similar calibre, there is no hope for us to see such facilities in a planned New Shillong as the new technology may still be resistant to them and therefore may not see the light of day. Till date, there is still no better system adopted by our state for our benefit, as our legislators have lost mental calibre who still do not agree with the benefits accepted by the rest of the world.

It is essential for our government to have 4-lane roads from the central point of New Shillong to its surroundings so that traffic congestion

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the tourists visiting both Old and New Shillong.

The major defects of the existing New Shillong lies in its unplanned stage and the other defects lie in the unforeseen circumstances of our state, based on the Government's financial capability. The present government has tried to promote Tourism by organising the Cherry Blossom festival and spent crores of rupees but with negligible infrastructure set up for such festivals such as hotels, home stays, and other facilities for tourists to enjoy their visits.

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It is essential for our government to have 4-lane roads from the central point of New Shillong to its surroundings so that traffic congestion

can be avoided in future, taking into consideration the existing rate of increase of vehicles registered within our state. A similar 4-lane road may also be constructed for returning towards the centre. One may think that such an idea is reckless for a small city like Shillong but we cannot rule out its benefits when we see lesser traffic jams on our roads 50 years from now. It is high time for our government to come out with a permanent solution to ease the existing traffic congestion in our Old Shillong (which was not planned since its inception) as this really affects the life of the common man. I still believe that our government has not done any research on the failure of the electronics traffic signal which was operational for a short period in Shillong. So, we need to urge our government to raise any objection in the electronics traffic signal which is operational for a short period in Shillong. So, we need to urge our government to raise any objection in the electronics traffic signal which is operational for a short period in Shillong.

I have seen how effective of his filing of nomination when he indubitably hit the ball, eye-staring at NPP and BJP are, on the sly, playing cheap drama for ultimately when the dust of the feverish election air has settled down, they shall join forces until 2023; thereafter they will throw mud of allegations at each other yet again! Interestingly, Sanbor Shullai, the BJP contestant from South Shillong has, without mincing words, asserted that during the campaign period the NPP will show how they abhor BJP but after March 2nd they will cajole the BJP as "Bhai-Bhai", since NPP expects money from the Union Government! No wonder, from the glaring past instances, we can perceptively notice that NPP is invariably seeing the line set by the BJP. They have rightly been dubbed as B team of BJP. A conspicuous and incontestable example was when the NPP led Sabka member Aashu Sangma, the sibling of our incumbent Chief Minister, voted in favour of CAA in Parliament to the utter shock of the indigenous citizens. This, many opine, is only the tip of a massive iceberg!

**Voting NPP is voting BJP!**

Editor,

It's somewhat amusing to note that preceding Meghalaya's assembly polling date of February 27 the NPP and BJP were in the thick of a slugfest, the latter leaving no stone unturned to fault the former as if they're sworn adversaries. At the end of the day, post the date in question they will be hobnobbing in secrecy and hush themselves as strong bedfellows to devise a mechanism on how to share-pool cabinet portfolios that can sustain a five year term.

Jacalistically, Manuel Baidart the present Congress candidate from East Shillong constituency couldn't have been more right on the day

VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

**Wanted strong law against drug peddling**

Editor,

Approx. of the news 'Seizure worth Rs 74.18 crore seized during the raid of MCC' is a wakeup call for the powers that be. I cannot imagine what is happening every day in the State in the absence of "professional" drugs enforcement to oversee this menace. In fact, there is a need for a separate "specialized drug enforcement agency" in the State. I appeal to all the newly elected members of the 11th Meghalaya Legislative Assembly to bring out a law - 'Misuse of Drugs Act' on the lines of the Statutes of the Republic of Singapore.

Your etc,  
Gay Marbanang,  
Via email

**Case for a 'legal coalition' of Opposition parties to fight attacks by Modi gov**

**Use of central agencies to browbeat rivals has crossed all limits**

By Sushil Kutty

We are in the lides of March. And like Caesar's wife, all holders of top positions in India should be above suspicion. Shouldn't that apply to the Prime Minister of India? It's a thought. Why should anybody get a free pass, spared the rigour that applies to every Indian citizen, just because he/she can claim privilege by dint of his/her position?

Fact is, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with his alleged links to industrialist Gautam Adani, cannot claim privilege and place himself at ease or suspicion Adani, whose wealth has been deserting him like the proverbial rat under a cloud. And Adani has cast a shadow on Narendra Modi and, truth



be told, on the Modi government itself.

Gautam Adani was allegedly up to hanky-panky; fixing deals which forced him out of the shell companies, and into the open. He has to be investigated. But for glaringly obvious reasons he isn't being investigated. Adani is being given all the time in the world to cover his tracks.

It's a shame, but if Delhi's just-resigned Education Minister Manish Sisodia must be shadowed clean, without a squeak darkening the brow, then Modi too should be above suspicion. The Prime Minister's post cannot be a shield, just like Manish Sisodia has to face the inquisition, so should Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Both are equal before the law. Modi should not forget his Gujarat Chief Ministerly held in Rapar, Chhat-

tingarh. He hoped opposition parties will take the proposal seriously and not dismiss it summarily as most politicians are prone to. However, it is hard to believe that opposition parties will drop all their differences and, in a show of singular solidarity, approach the Supreme Court in a 'legal coalition' to put a stop to the Modi government's misuse of central investigative agencies like the CBI and ED.

Abhishek Manu Singhvi told the Congress plenary that it would be easier to get the opposition parties into a 'legal coalition' against the Modi government than get them into a 'political coalition' to take on the BJP in direct one-on-one fights in each of the 542 parliamentary constituencies.

the running of the government. The Modi government has turned authoritarian and there's nobody to rein it in, especially when it comes to the misuse of central investigative agencies.

It is time to take action. In fact, there is a valid ground for a legal coalition of the top 10 parties going to the court and raising the issue," said Abhishek Manu Singhvi, national spokesman of the Congress and these days lawyer for Manish Sisodia. Singhvi's 'legal coalition' refers to the coming together of the political parties targeted by central investigative agencies let loose on the Opposition by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

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tingarh. He hoped opposition parties will take the proposal seriously and not dismiss it summarily as most politicians are prone to. However, it is hard to believe that opposition parties will drop all their differences and, in a show of singular solidarity, approach the Supreme Court in a 'legal coalition' to put a stop to the Modi government's misuse of central investigative agencies like the CBI and ED.

**Abhishek Manu Singhvi told the Congress plenary that it would be easier to get the opposition parties into a 'legal coalition' against the Modi government than get them into a 'political coalition' to take on the BJP in direct one-on-one fights in each of the 542 parliamentary constituencies.**

Did Modi's powerful position give the Gautam Adani industrial complex undue benefits? Isn't a secret that prima facie it looks like Gautam Adani had been making his money since the time Modi's sun started shining i.e., since 2014. Nearly nine years later, Modi should rightly be up for questioning, but isn't. Not even a friendly jest with cross-eyed journalists!

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's allergy to face journalists in what's called a presser or a press conference is one of the 10 most cowardly and venous things in the world. There was the time when a BBC journalist made Modi withdraw in a huff!

The fact is, today's Prime Minister of India is beyond scrutiny. And the pliable media covers up for the Prime

Minister. Covers up for his lack of transparency. Covers up for the omissions and commissions of the Modi government. Covers up the fact that most Modi ministers are unknown faces even after 3-5 years, strangers actually!

There should be an inquiry, but not because most of the ministers are faceless with almost nil name-recognition, but because there's something called getting to the bottom of things and it's about the time the people of India get to the bottom of many things concerning India under Modi's watch.

Far from long the Modi government has been left to its devices, unquestioned and under no obligation to come clean on many things relating

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

*"To be a consistent winner means preparing not just one day, one month or even one year - but for a lifetime."*

— Bill Rodgers

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No. 5296 SHILLONG, TRIPURA, MARCH 3, 2023

**A vote for continuity**

WHILE Conrad Sangma's NPP could somehow manage to retain power in Meghalaya, the results in Nagaland were emphatic in favour of the ruling NDFP-BJP alliance. The BJP retains power in Tripura. Sangma would require the backing of one or other party to run a stable government for his second term. This being the outcome of the three-state assembly polls in the North-East, what is obvious is that there is a deficit in the people's backing for Sangma though a part of his failure to gain a majority of seats in the assembly is understandable. The former NPP ally, the BJP, fielded candidates in all 59 seats and the new political entity, the TMC, showed its limited mass support by winning some votes which would otherwise have gone to the Congress. Should Sangma require legislative support, he could bank on the BJP that has by now understood its limitations in Meghalaya and should reconcile to the situation and back the NPP. This should help Meghalaya get what's due to it from the Modi government at the Centre.

The BJP proves a point by retaining power in Tripura despite the serious odds it faced this time. The emergence of the new regional outfit seeking a separate state within Tripura, the TIPRA MOTHA, had changed the political equations to an extent yet again in what was once a bastion of the left. Overall, the BJP has reasons to cheer as it would continue to share power in Nagaland as well. Yet, the three-state elections showed the saffron party has its limitations in the North-East as far as mass support is concerned. Its supremacy in Tripura for the past five years however continued. A change of chief minister in Tripura too helped the BJP to consolidate its vote bank, as the results proved. A consolidation of the non-tribal votes in the Bengali dominated areas was what the BJP attempted at in view of the strong offensive it faced from TIPRA. However, it would appear that the Bengali vote was divided between the Left and the BJP.

Clearly, the Congress party has yet again lost the plot. The party that once reigned supreme in the north-eastern states and gave a tough fight to the regional parties has proven it has little chance of regaining power. Its irrelevance is loud and clear. This has largely to do with its loss of power in Delhi, the national capital; meaning it also lost its strength to manipulate situations to its advantage. In sum, all three states were not in a mood to vote out the ruling parties.

**Letters to the Editor**

**The nature of Meghalaya Politics**

Editor,  
Can anyone really claim to have a clue as to how politics operate in a parliamentary democratic constituency called Meghalaya? For starters everyone, practically everyone, in the state has been crying out loud about the rampant corruption that has been allowed to permeate the governance in the state of Meghalaya. Four years of unadulterated corruption practiced by the MDA right from the illegal mining and transportation of coal to the unexplainable catastrophe of the Dome of the Assembly crashing down without rhyme or reason. Every one blamed it on the induction of rich coal barons and contractors into the political system of the state. The Khass even came up with a name for it. The High Levels, meaning VIPs who can get away with every crime under the IPC just because they happen to run the Government. Then in his political campaign for the BJP, the Union Home Minister,

Amn Shah has called the state the most corrupt one or so going on. That is politics in Meghalaya. Does anyone understand how it operates?

Yours etc.,  
Timothy Rance,  
Via email

A very moving and honest write-up of Alben Thring's 2023 (ST March 1, 2023) sees little change in our fortunes post March 2 after the results are out. The article touched me immensely. Here is a man on the ground revealing first hand the plight of the village people of Rangbang Subyantiang. It grieves me to read how we, the people, have grown so hard-hearted, indifferent and casual because we are not affected directly! I wonder whether the few questions he raises ever penetrates the hearts and minds of the administration? Maybe, just maybe, if the villagers' prayer of Paul to

**Meghalaya results reflect the voters' (ex) aspirations**

By Patricia Mukhim

by then, their feelings toward the candidates' policy positions.

Western trends conventional political analyses on their head are suggests that the biggest challenge for politicians is how to move the electorate. He shows how it can be done through examples of what candidates have said - or could have said - in debates, speeches and ads. Western's discoveries could transform electoral arithmetic, showing how a different view of the mind and brain could lead to a new way of talking with voters about issues that matter to them the most. Issues that while the structure of the brain cannot be changed what can be changed is the way we appeal to it.

So those that have lost the elections now have the time to sit and think about what Drew Westen has said. Better still they can get his book and chew on it. My own study suggests that voters don't wait to listen to stand speeches. They want moving speeches that move them, sometimes even to

*"The idea of the mind as a cool calculator that makes decisions by weighing the evidence bears no relation to how the brain actually works. When political candidates assume voters dispassionately make decisions based on 'the issues,' they lose."*

but with the same DNA. So the outcomes would be the same.

This only bright light in this election is the phenomenal win of the Voice of People's Party (VPP) candidates who have offered their services to the people without giving them anything in return because they don't need to buy people's loyalties. They also didn't factor the anti-incumbency factor to deal with. So they are starting on a new slate. Some of the young candidates from the Congress and VPP could not make it this time but they must hang on and continue with their work of addressing the needs of the underserved across the Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

The BJP put up 60 candidates which was an audacious move but had to be done to win just one MLAs. For some reason the BJP has not been able to really expand its base in Meghalaya despite the years of hard work put in by the party. The voters of the Sangh Parivar. There

difference in the working style of both parties has been seen in the election results as an indicator of a mature democracy that India is and in a mature democracy there is no place for caste, creed or religion. Only development matters along with national interest and integrity of the country. In the North Eastern states where Hindus are in a minority and BJP is known as a pro-Hindu party, the voters did not pay heed to this factor and supported the BJP. So we can say that the results of elections have changed the entire political scenario and also proved that our country has a mature democracy.

The impact of these elections will be seen in the Karnataka assembly elections which will be held two months hence. The BJP had already declared the programme for the month of March and the state leaders will continuously visit the state and organise meetings. Karnataka state is very important for the BJP. If the party loses Karnataka it will have a great impact on the coming assembly elections in five states and also on the parliament elections to be

held in March 2024.

The Congress will fight the elections on the basis of the Adani issue. How much support the Party will get will be clear from the Karnataka assembly elections. Opposition parties are making their own strategies against the BJP but they are not united. Even in the north eastern states the TMC contested the elections separately and won a few seats. It is expected that they should fight the elections unitedly to face the BJP.

Yash Pal Ralhan,  
Via email

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**Trinamool Congress gets big jolt in state assembly elections**

By Ashis Biswas

Ironically, opposition parties in India were further divided by the outcome of Assembly elections in three North Eastern states, not to mention the Sagardighi seat by-election in West Bengal. In broad terms, the Left parties and the Indian National Congress (INC) fared much better than their strong regional challengers like the Trinamool Congress (TMC).

The day's (March 2) major success undoubtedly went to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), especially in the Northeast. The party's loss and third place finish at Sagardighi assembly in Bengal did not hurt much, although the major erosion of its popular support from the earlier polls caused concern to its leadership.

The TMC's unravelling was nothing short of spectacular. Months before the elections were announced the party, helped by the formidable expertise of the well known IPAC team led by redoubtable poll expert Mr Prasant Kishor, had set up camps at expensive locations in Tripura and Meghalaya. Mr Rajul Banerjee, former Bengal Minister, was made a party leader-in-residence in Tripura. Such early preparations surprised most observers at Agartala and Shillong, as most parties usually carried out a more relaxed pre-poll campaign compared to the more energetic efforts seen in other regions/states.

For several months, with TMC General Secretary Mr Abhishek Banerjee MP making frequent visits to oversee pre-poll preparations and hone up the party's aggressive anti-BJP campaign, the TMC made all the running in both states. Lesser Bengal leaders and Ministers also assisted their spectacular (and expensive) efforts.

The Meghalaya-based media commented widely about the massive scale of the TMC's campaign, whether in terms of the outstation party using the record number of colourful flags, posters and meetings, or the scale of its meetings and mass mobilisation. No wonder the TMC's final anti-ethnic film in both states was a major subject of post poll analysis in the NE-based media and among the resident commentators.

The TMC failed to win a single seat in Tripura while it won only five in Meghalaya out of 59! In some areas, the votes it won in Tripura were actually lower than the NOTA figures! There was no question of its coming to power in either state, contrary to the thundering promises made by Mr Banerjee or the Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

In Tripura, the TMC failed to work out an alliance with other parties and conceded only 28 seats. In Meghalaya it was on a better ticket, as its campaign was headed by former Chief Minister Dr Mukul Sangma.

Too late, Dr Sangma realized that his association with the TMC, a party he had joined quitting his parliamentary position, had cost him dear in 2023. Under Dr Sangma, the INC had honourably emerged as the second largest party to the ruling NDFP led by Mr Conrad Sangma in 2018 polls by getting 21 seats.

While it is too early for a detailed analysis of the TMC's debacle, one point needs to be made about its contradictory and confusing pre-poll campaigning. The party countered its own political message in Tripura and Meghalaya.

Prime example: Bengal chief Minister Ms Banerjee treated Tripura as an extension of West Bengal in terms

of its linguistic, cultural and other similarity with the larger state. "We feel at home here...our language, food and culture are the same," said the beaming Chief Minister. Saying this, she totally ignored the rise of the Tripura Motha party, representing 30.35% native tribal population of Tripura, with its own distinct language, culture, customs and history!

In contrast, she and nephew Abhishek held large rallies in neighbouring Meghalaya where they assured mainly Khasis and Garo tribes peoples, that the TMC was NOT a party that would run by Bengalis out of Kolkata. Such glaring contradictions left most people confused and far from impressed!

It was odd to reflect that for all its reputed expertise, the team of IPAC experts had apparently overlooked the formidable expertise of the well known IPAC team led by redoubtable poll expert Mr Prasant Kishor, had set up camps at expensive locations in Tripura and Meghalaya. Mr Rajul Banerjee, former Bengal Minister, was made a party leader-in-residence in Tripura. Such early preparations surprised most observers at Agartala and Shillong, as most parties usually carried out a more relaxed pre-poll campaign compared to the more energetic efforts seen in other regions/states.

No wonder, more seasoned local politicians in the BJP camp led by the witty Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswas Sarma and others, eagerly pounced on such TMC bowlers, and made merry. There was more talk in NE's political circles about the high expenditure campaign carried out by the TMC, as the party virtually camped for weeks at top hotels at Agartala and Shillong, than upon its so-called manifesto and 'political programmes'!

As the drabry commentary about the TMC's losses continued on the electronic media, most analysts wondered why Mamata Banerjee's party had not formed a coalition with its earlier fiercest forays into the Goa Assembly elections and the Tripura crisis before that. On both occasions the party had drawn a blank, but had notched up a total expenditure of around Rs 80 crore, according to expert estimates. The TMC never publicly disputed.

Going into 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the INC improved its position in the Northeast by putting up a reasonable performance along with the Left in Tripura, effectively projecting its vote share if not doing very well in terms of winning seats.

However, its impressive victory in the Sagardighi by-election over the TMC by a thumping margin of nearly 23,000 votes over the TMC was a major shot in the arm for the INC. Far more than a personal win for the battling Congress MP Aulih Choudhury, it meant that the INC had now one member in the Bengal Assembly.

Also, the margin of its win at Sagardighi provided India's grand old party with many debating points against its louder TMC opponents whether in the Lok Sabha or elsewhere. And its new organisation, had cost him dear in 2023. Under Dr Sangma, the INC had honourably emerged as the second largest party to the ruling NDFP led by Mr Conrad Sangma in 2018 polls by getting 21 seats.

While it is too early for a detailed analysis of the TMC's debacle, one point needs to be made about its contradictory and confusing pre-poll campaigning. The party countered its own political message in Tripura and Meghalaya.

Prime example: Bengal chief Minister Ms Banerjee treated Tripura as an extension of West Bengal in terms

"Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen." — Albert Einstein

The Shillong Times

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Topsy turvy politics in Meghalaya... The election for the state legislative assembly in Meghalaya is over and the results are out. The state is going to have a new government very soon.

To say that elections in Meghalaya are free and fair is to deny the wrongdoings that the candidates have indulged in. Liquor was free flowing as was evidenced in a video clip that went viral.

It is in this scenario that the Supreme Court order on March 2, for revamping the electoral system comes as a piece of good news. The apex court has said that a Committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in parliament and the Chief Justice of India would not select the Chief Election Commissioner and State Election Commissioners.

Letters to the Editor

BJP to cleanse most corrupt MDA?

After the exit polls Conrad Sangma was seen visiting his counterpart Himanta Biswa Sarma in Guwahati. The emerging results of Tripura, Nagaland and Meghalaya were pleasing to the BJP in Delhi although the BJP in Meghalaya won just 2 out of 59 seats.

Few days before the elections, Home Minister, Amit Shah declared Meghalaya as the most corrupt state. And in the height of shocking political posturing behaviour Ernest Mawia met Conrad Sangma to support the NPP.

On September 2022, during the most tragic week of the Meghalaya Assembly

dom collapse, thanks to revelation by Justice BP Kishoy who was heading the National Green Tribunal (NGT), the MDA Government was berated by the Supreme Court for its connivance with the State and Central Pollution Control Boards.

As the people who cried hoarse against the Casino bill disapproval by the Meghalayas in electing the UDP - a party that supported Conrad Sangma and Prestone Tynsong. Worse the UDP is blind to the fact that Conrad Sangma's plan is to eliminate the Party to zero.

Unless the people of Meghalaya are aware of the dangers of the CAA and other hidden agenda of the BJP and also the devastation of Narnapur Reserve

Towards meeting the aspiration of the common man

By Dr. Sridhar Kundu

The election for the state legislative assembly in Meghalaya is over and the results are out. The state is going to have a new government very soon. Congratulations to the people of Meghalaya, the political parties, and their leaders for the smooth conduct of the election in the state.

The urban-located youth need skilled employment. All of them aspire to have well-paid jobs not necessarily only in government offices or in government-owned enterprises.

gha - laya is the symbol of the smooth functioning of democracy. Experiences from the field say that leaders from various political parties, including those in power and in opposition, do come together, debate and discuss various issues with calm and propriety.

In a democratically conducted election, the outcome is neither controlled nor regulated. The result is uncertain. The higher the degree of uncertainty of results shows the higher level of fairness and transparency in the electoral process.

The state is yet to recover from the economic downturn caused due to covid-19 pandemic. The major issue before the state as highlighted by many political parties during their campaign is unemployment. Many political parties have included the issue of unemployment and its quick solution in their manifesto.

We the public are being heavily duped. Democracy is being murdered in broad daylight. The VPP in its attempt to blow the winds of change to rescue this dying, wretched state, deeply mired in corruption had performed well in its maiden electoral battle.

Forest with Lumshong and Brishynot people having to move to lesser polluted places they will suffer in the long run. Conrad Sangma's double standards vis a vis the people of Sohra and not granting them a district in deference to the wishes of Late Dinkar Roy is still fresh in their memories.

With more news on social media today we the people are already aware about the two HSPDP MLAs now wanting to join hands with the NPP-BJP plus other independents to form a government. Ironically the HSPDP President was not aware of this self-deflection of the two MLAs about the knowledge of the Party and has written to the NPP that the HSPDP is not extending support to the above coalition.

people and, stands as one of the reasons behind many socio-economic evils. However, there is no quick-fix solution to the problem of unemployment. Steps need to be taken in the right direction to achieve the solution in the medium and long run.

The economic growth and development of a nation depend on the strength of its industrialisation. The industrial sector generates value addition and provides employment opportunities. It absorbs the surplus labour force in the economy, both educated and uneducated and even those who remained

of the final output to each single demand hub. The life cycle of the product improves with the development of physical infrastructure and contributes to the growth of the industry and creates employment opportunities in the state.

"In a democratically conducted election, the outcome is neither controlled nor regulated. The result is uncertain. The higher the degree of uncertainty of results shows the higher level of fairness and transparency in the electoral process. As the election results are out and a new government is going to be functional in a few days, the first and foremost priority is to meet all the aspirations of the people. The state is yet to recover from the economic downturn caused due to covid-19 pandemic."

prises. A well-paid job also does not necessarily mean a job with a fat salary. But, the salary should be adequate to manage the family in the face of rising food prices. It is necessary to add here that the current food price inflation has reached above 7 per cent and is expected to rise due to supply constraints in various parts of the world.

Horse trading in the air?

Editor, With more news on social media today we the people are already aware about the two HSPDP MLAs now wanting to join hands with the NPP-BJP plus other independents to form a government. Ironically the HSPDP President was not aware of this self-deflection of the two MLAs about the knowledge of the Party and has written to the NPP that the HSPDP is not extending support to the above coalition.

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N-E fall-out - New coalitions to emerge in run-up to 2024

By Shivaji Sarkar

The elections in North East India are lessons for Congress which has learnt as Jairam Ramesh says that local leadership matters even as Congress president begins the effort to unite the opposition with his bid to place DMK at the birthday bash of its president and Tamil Nadu chief minister Stalin.

It is no less a challenge for the BJP, particularly in Tripura, where it has just edged past the crucial majority mark despite massive anti-incumbency until a year ago, thanks to Tipra Motha for splitting opposition votes. It is crucial as the party is building up Tripura as the gateway to the region as also southeast Asia, and the rest of India. Tripura was a tough game. The victory, even with a slender majority, makes a difference. The party will play a larger role in the region with expected increase in the clot and possible fund flow.

Where does the Congress fall? To emphasise on Ramesh, the Congress does not have the ability to

return the local leadership in Tripura, its own capable leader Pradyot Debbarman the scion of the Roybar family, was freed to exit and today lead Tipra Motha. In Meghalaya, another leader Mukul Sangma joined Trinamool Congress. There are a host of others who moved out with them. And Congress has not been able to regain its position in Nagaland.

Had the Congress retained Debbarman possibly would have been an equal partner, not junior, with the CPM-Left. Pradyot also for his finicky role in partying in the BJP and now has sent signals that he could prefer to share power with the BJP as a junior ally and betray his tribal supporters.

There is the flip side too. Is the local leadership gaining somewhere? Else how did Congress have three surprising victories in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra? The most surprising is the victory of Bayron Hava Sagardighi in West Bengal against the Trinamool with the support of BJP and Left Front. It will be interesting to watch who the Left fighting the BJP or Trinamool? It also shows that Congress can have strange bedfellows to strike a deal with. Is it an aberration? Or an emerging pattern? It may be an astute strategy as it was a prestige battle for state Congress president Adhir Chowdhury in his home district of Murshidabad. The election was necessary owing to the demise of state minister Subrata Saha.

It may also be a lesson for West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee. Her outburst against "imperial" CPI(M)-BJP Congress alliance may be correct but if she does not join an alliance with the Congress or BJP her Trinamool survival could be a stake. Or as she says, despite the debacle, she would like to go in alone in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections!

Perhaps she should rethink her stance. Maharashtra again is a lesson for the opposition. At Chinchwad, The Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi leader, disgruntled Shiv Sena leader Rahul Kalate polled 43170 votes to upset the chances of NCP candidate Nana Kate - 96175 votes, making victory of Ashwini Japat of BJP with 131464 votes easier. Kalate and Kate together got 1,39,345. Combined MVA supported Congress candidate Ravindra Dhanekar got 73194 votes. BJP candidate Ransone who got 62,244 votes in a BJP stronghold in Kasba Park. If the Aghadi keeps its rank and file together it can change the Maharashtra scenario. The Trinamool results also indicate that a united opposition can effect change. The ruling DMK-backed Congress nominee EVS Elangovan won the Erode fast by-election. Tamil Nadu chief minister termed it as public endorsement of Dravidian model of govern-

ance of his government. But TN is also the radar of BJP, where through Tamil Sangma it has reached stable families. The pattern is clear. Wherever the opposition is cohesive, as in Meghalaya, it could score well. The NPP has emerged as the single largest party with 36 seats. But now a BJP organiser for Northeast says post-poll, the BJP would wipe out chief minister Conrad Sangma for picking up a fight with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and refusing to allow him to hold a public meeting at the PA Sangma stadium. In Nagaland, NDDP with 25, BJP 12 and Republican Party 2, Neiripha Rio sails through. Again it shows that cohesion in the current political scenario. It also unfolds another scenario in Jharkhand. The JMM-Congress suffered a setback. The JASU "All Jharkhand Students Union" party backed by the BJP won the seat held by the Congress. This is an emerging scenario. The 2024 elections may see many curious moves. The BJP is quietly inching towards it. It is trying up alliances in many states. The opposition is still in an experimental mode. The BJP is trying to upset every possible opposition move whether in Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, Bengal or elsewhere. It is expected to be more ruthless in Tripura and finish off Pradyot Debbarma who can emerge as a potential challenger. There are many fence sitters like the Mamata Banerjee. The situation in Bihar remains uncertain as also in many other states. The Aam Aadmi Party has been vacillating. Post the Manish Sinodia debacle it may review its "ekla challo" politics. Congress may not only have to seek new allies but also strengthen its inner set up and bring back its poll momentum. Post the North-East problems many surprises are awaited. Indian politics may change fast in the run-up to 2024 as new coalitions emerge.

# Cocktails, curry and afternoon tea...

**I**t was the talk of the town. From afternoon teas at Buckingham Palace to lunches, dinners and drinks provided by London's political hostesses. Between 1930 and 1932, India's social and political leaders headed to London to negotiate the constitutional future of India in the British empire.

The Round Table Conference is mostly remembered for Gandhi's unsuccessful participation in the second session — where he failed to reconcile competing Hindu and Muslim demands. But this was only one small part of a conference of over 100 delegates.

Its three long sessions (two months, then three, then one) were captured by the world's news media. UK prime minister Ramsay MacDonald's concluding address from St James's Palace was filmed and broadcast in cinemas worldwide, as was the positive reaction of Indian delegates.

This was part of the retaliation against Gandhi's civil disobedience movement of nonviolence and non-cooperation against the British government.

Indian nationalists had been growing increasingly impatient for greater self-government in the 1920s. Divisions were rising between religious groups and politicians across the Indian empire.

To break the deadlock the British Labour government agreed to host an experiment in the new art of modern, international conferencing — turned to imperial ends. The conference was targeted at changing public opinion as much as producing specific political outcomes. Urban landscapes provided the stages upon which international relations were performed, for global audiences.

In a new book the author explores the historical geographies of the Round Table Conference and looks at how the city shaped the conference and how the conference helped shape a multicultural — and at times openly racist — imperial capital.

## Imperial London

Official business took place almost exclusively in ancient palaces. The Royal Gallery at the Palace of Westminster was where the conference opened and it concluded in the King's Robing Room in the House of Lords.

London proved itself well equipped for the challenge of becoming an international city. Afternoon teas at Buckingham Palace were held for each session. At the second, Gandhi's homespun dhoti (referred to in the press as a "lincloth") and ex-

## Inside the 1930s London conference that brought Gandhi to Buckingham Palace



posed knees caused a sensation. It was, however, the Mahatma's calmness while under hostile interrogation by King-Emperor George V that averted a political controversy.

London's religious spaces also played their part. The London Mosque at Wandsworth was a welcome home for Muslim delegates and its imam, Maulvi Farzand Ali, hosted an "at-home" reception for

delegates at the Strand Hotel on January 14 1931. Ten days earlier the imam had conducted evening prayers over the body of Maulana Mohammad Ali, a delegate who died during the conference.

Gandhi's first meeting was held at the Quaker Friends House in Euston. He stayed with the pacifist social reformer Mariel Lester at the mission house of Kinsley Hall in the east end, itself part modelled

on Gandhi's ashram at Sabarmati in India.

London's secular institutes also entertained delegates during official events and out-of-hours socialising. The government hosted a reception at the Imperial Institute, the grand display space of the products and artefacts of empire in South Kensington (later demolished to make way for Imperial College).

The Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House also opened its library to conference delegates and hosted debates, as did many of London's learned societies.

## Sleeping, eating and socialising

All delegates were given an accommodation budget, which many of the richer visitors (mostly the Indian princes and maharajas) topped up to stay at London's most exclusive hotels.

Others had to stay further out in cheaper accommodation that agreed to take Indian guests (many did not). Some elite delegates were members of London's gentlemen's clubs, clustered around St James's.

Most were not and the hosting of Indian guests in the majority of clubs was discouraged. As such, an Indian Social Centre was established for the first session at Chesterfield Gardens in Mayfair, where delegates could find cheap accommodation and host guests without fear of racial discrimination.

The food at the Social Centre was provided by chefs from Veeraswamy's restaurant, London's exclusive and oldest Indian restaurant, situated on Regent Street. Cheaper food and less Raj-nostalgic dining could be found in the growing Indian dining scene in Soho, with Shafiq's affordable restaurant marketing itself as the prime conference delegate gawping spot.

While the conference featured only three Indian women delegates, London's hostesses influenced proceedings with their lunches, dinners, drinks and "at-homes". Less often recorded, these domestic spaces hosted evening conversations as the intractable problems of Indian constitutional reform rambled on through the nights.

From palaces to parlours, the imperial capital furnished this international Indian event with the infrastructures that enabled both British and Indian delegates to put their case to the world for the subcontinent's future, whether within or without the British empire. *(The Conversation)*

## Lithium reserves to open up new opportunities: Arun Murugappan



**T**he finding of lithium reserves in India will open up many opportunities though the actual realisation of the mined resource may take some years, said M.A.M. Arunachalam, also known as Arun Murugappan, Executive Chairman of multi-product company Tube Investments of India Ltd (TII).

The Indian government recently announced that it has found lithium inferred resources of 5.9 million tonnes in the Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir. He said India should utilise its natural resource even though some had said the country should skip the lithium battery made and go for other technologies like fuel cell.

As per recently published re-

ports, India at present imports lithium worth close to \$20.64 million a year.

The flagship company of the Chennai-based conglomerate Rs 547 billion Murugappa group, TII, through its subsidiary TII Clean Mobility has got into the electric vehicle (EV) space majorly through acquisitions.

Interestingly TII, with its various products — metals, auto and components, cycles and others — and listed subsidiaries like Shanthi Gears, CG Power and Industrial Solutions and a couple of unlisted ones, is termed as a group within the Murugappa group.

Several years ago, the Murugappa group had launched and closed production and sales of electric two-wheelers several

years back — through BSA Motors — has now re-entered the EV segment.

The TII Clean Mobility has announced the launch of its electric passenger three-wheelers. The company has also announced its plan to launch electric tractors and trucks.

In a short interview with IANS, Murugappan talks about the impact of lithium reserves and more. Excerpts:

**IANS:** Your views on the lithium reserves found in India?

**Murugappan:** It is welcome news for the entire Indian EV industry and will open many opportunities.

**IANS:** In your estimation, how

long would it take for mining lithium in India?

**Murugappan:** As per the reports from the media, we have reached the G1 stage (prospecting) for the lithium presence. Therefore, further exploration (G2 stage) and the exact determination of reserve (G1 stage) will decide the starting of actual mining along with a consolidated framework from the regulatory bodies in place.

**IANS:** What does the finding of lithium reserves mean for the EV industry players? Will it result in reduction in vehicle prices?

**Murugappan:** The lithium resource in India will open many opportunities including sustenance, local research and development (R&D) on enhancing the battery chemistries and also a reduction in the battery price.

**IANS:** Do you think EV players will go for backward integration? What are your views for your group on this point?

**Murugappan:** The industry players might consider possibilities to ensure a smooth supply chain with a competitive price along with a superior differentiating technology.

**IANS:** Should India skip the lithium battery and go the next step? If yes, why and if no, why?

**Murugappan:** I think we should strongly consider utilizing the resource. The reason for this, the battery element in the automotive industry may remain even if we migrate to the next level of technology such as fuel cell.

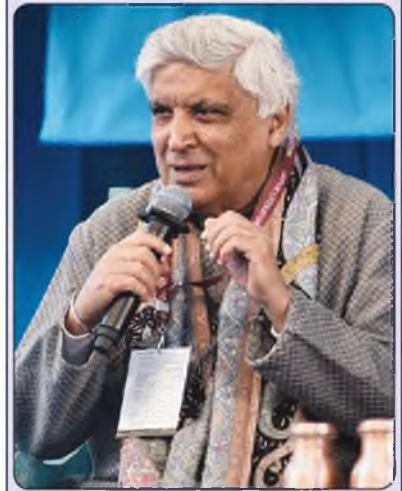
**IANS:** If lithium is mined and made available in the country, will there be any reduction in the global prices? If yes, to what extent? What is the current rate? Will there be more battery inking units in the country?

**Murugappan:** It all depends upon a few parameters such as inflow or production rate of raw material, local consumption, grade of the reserve, conversion cost and others.

**IANS:** Will there be any redrawing of joint venture, technical collaboration agreements by the parties?

**Murugappan:** It will open many opportunities for collaboration in the area of technology and innovation. *(IANS)*

## God speaks in your own language: Javed Akhtar



By Sukanti Deepak

**H**e says language does not belong to religions, but regions. That God speaks to each one in his or her own language. Javed Akhtar, the atheist, rebel child at 16, the love letter writer for friends in college, the one who believes that the simplicity of dialogues in Sholay make them unforgettable even 49 years later, when asked about what inspires him, smiles, "Well, deadlines and panic continue to be the driving force."

Someone, who kicked up quite a storm during his recent visit to Pakistan for the 'Faiz Festival' with his comments on the 26/11 perpetrators still roaming free there, stresses, "Well, the media reported what I said during my visit across the border, but how many outlets (media) bothered to convey that there was a huge applause by the Pakistani audience. Let us not forget that what we there want good relations with India. Relations between governments must not affect its between people."

Even as Urdu continues to vanish from the mainstream, a language that was used widely in Punjab, the lyricist, who was part of the Chitkara Lit. Fest held in Chandigarh wonders what is stopping the current generation from learning it. "People proudly say that their grandparents were well-versed in the language, but I always wonder what is stopping the young from learning?"

Stressing that in the 20th century, Punjab's contribution to the language has been immense — nazm, ghazal all started here, he adds, "Religion borrows our language. This state was bilingual, and you have done a mistake by leaving Urdu. I feel it is important to know how to read it, and that is where the role of educational institutes comes in. I really hope universities start teaching Urdu."

Someone who always wanted to get into films and idolised Guru Dutt says it was dialogue writing that gave him recognition, and then began a new journey of writing poetry and lyrics. *(IANS)*



"Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom." — Thomas Jefferson

The Shillong Times  
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Triumph of regionalists

WHILE the BJP made a marginal presence in two of the three state assembly polls in the North-East, the regional parties took the upper hand in terms of both vote and seat tallies. The BJP can take some satisfaction in that its rival political establishment, the Congress, fared worse. In the national election sweepstakes, the sister states in the North-East too have their eminent roles to play.

The election results in Nagaland and Meghalaya were not wholly unexpected, but the surprise was more in the manner in which the BJP managed to hold on to power in Tripura. This, even as the saffron party's assembly strength came down from 36 to 32 while the BJP ally -- regional Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) - lost seven of its seats and won only one seat this time. The gain from this erosion was for the Tipra Motha of Manjya Debarma. The regional political entity seeking a separate state within Tripura not only won 13 seats but also emerged as the main opposition. The CPI-M and the Congress that entered into an opportunistic alliance to defeat the BJP -- just as the two did in West Bengal to defeat the TMC -- managed to win 11 seats and three seats respectively. Both the parties substantially lost their seat strengths in the assembly. In this attempt to win power at all costs the people have shown them the right place; signifying a maturity for Indian democracy even in the far-flung corners of the country.

Conrad Sangma can take pride in the fact that even as the BJP deserted him, he stood his ground in the election arena. A chastened BJP, with no more than two seats, is now ready to offer him support. Among other things, the issue of corruption was one reason that the BJP cited against Sangma for avoiding a poll-alliance with National People's Party (NPP). The election results by themselves do not draw the curtains down on such allegations; and such issues should be taken to their logical conclusions. At the same time, expectations are that the BJP would, in the next five years, work hand-in-hand with Sangma to speed up development of the state. More central support is what the state aspires for in its growth push. Having come this far, Meghalaya can hope to have a stable government even as the NPP does not have a majority of its own. Those in the Congress and the TMC could sooner or later be sitting ducks for the ruling party to do poaching. This is more so as the TMC's attempt to at least emerge as the principal opposition in Meghalaya did not succeed.

Elections in Meghalaya have ended and despite facing massive pressure from its own allies the National Peoples' Party emerged as the single largest party getting 26 seats. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which had won the Union Minister, Amit Shah and the Prime Minister Narendra Modi campaign in the state could win only two seats. During the campaign the BJP was one of NPP's vocal critics with Amit Shah describing the NPP-led MDA government as the most corrupt government in the country. At the Hill, who won from Pynubrambarah told Rajdeep Sardesai in an interview for India Today that he would advise the BJP not to ally with the NPP called upon. It seems the party high command in Delhi has ignored both Amit Shah and A. H. Hek by deciding its support to the NPP-led coalition. Both are seasoned politicians and this loss of face will not matter in the long run. In politics friends and foes are not forever.

With BJP pledging their support to the NPP the tally went up to 28 which became 30 with the addition of two independent MLAs, viz., Karush R Marak from Haghmara and Remington Gabil Momin from Rambarh Jyngam. In a 59-seat assembly this gives the NPP-led coalition a simple majority of 51%. Effectively they can do without any new MLA joining the coalition till the Soibam by-poll takes place when the equation might change again. Suddenly news broke that two MLAs of the Hills State Peoples' Democratic Party (HSPDP) viz., Methodius Dikhar and Shakliar Warji have pledged their support to the NPP-led coalition taking the number to 32. This meant that irrespective of the results in the upcoming Soibam by-poll NPP will continue to enjoy majority in the assembly.

Defection is a regular feature of Meghalaya politics and the news while amusing was not totally unexpected. Both Methodius Dikhar and Shakliar Warji knew that the NPP-led coalition does not need any new MLA but will welcome any to improve its numbers in its house. If they did not move soon, others might pledge their support and they will lose their seat at getting cabinet seats. Also they can always make the

Is a non-NPP government possible?

By Bhogorom Mawroh

argument that it's better to be in the Government so that they help their constituencies more effectively than being in the opposition. Ultimately did the people of Mawthoh-raishan and Mawshynri not vote for them to bring development to their respective areas? So what they did was for the benefit of their constituencies and no one has the right to judge them except for their supporters. The latter will do so next election when they can choose not to vote for them if they are unhappy with the decision.

The decision to defect however led to outbreak of protests from the pressure groups that saw it as a betrayal. Effigies of Methodius Dikhar and Shakliar Warji were burned and the former's office was set on fire. There are two reasons for the anger: firstly, it is claimed that NPP is a highly corrupt party; and secondly, the pressure groups want a Khasi Chief Minister which, they reason, can only come from a non-NPP government. In all of this, it is possible that some seem to have forgotten that the UDP, HSPDP and PDF (People's Democratic Front) were also part of the NPP-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance that ruled the state from 2018 to 2023. The charge of corruption applies to them as well. They can argue that even when in the Government they continually raised the issue of corruption. However, the fact that they complained but never withdrew their support goes the way for non-corrupt Government (??) makes that argument hollow and dishonest. So the issue of corruption is just eyes to claim fake moral authority.

The issue of having a Khasi Chief Minister is however different. DD Lapons was the last Khasi Chief Minister holding the office from 13 April 2009 to 19 April 2010. He was then followed by Mukul Sangma and the Congress leader, Vinod Kumar Sarma. So a state where more than half of the State's indigenous populations are Khasi-Jaintia there is a majoritarian demand that it is high time that 'Chief Minister should be a Khasi. But this is not how democracy works. In a democracy those who win the highest number of seats form the Government.

Various institutions, Revenue Receipt consists of tax revenue, non-tax revenue, share of Union Taxes, Duties, and grants from the Government of India. In the Financial Year 2016-17, the state had a Revenue Surplus of INR 602.41 crores which means that Receipts exceeded Expenditure by INR 602.41 crores.

During the financial years of 2019-20 and 2020-21, the state witnessed revenue deficits against of INR 151.60 crores and INR 151.88 crores respectively which clearly indicates how inefficient the MDA government is in managing the state's coffers.

The next time to look at would be the Fiscal Deficit of the State. The Fiscal Deficit is the difference between the Revenue Receipts plus Non-Debt Capital Receipts and the Total Expenditure. Fiscal Deficit is reflective of the total borrowing requirements of the Government. According to the MFRBM Act, 2006 is 28%. This is a very bad sign and as a State will have a very tough time paying back the loans in the future.

Now let us look at the trend of the Revenue Deficit Surplus of the state which is the gap between Revenue Expenditure and Revenue Receipts. Revenue expenditure relates to those expenses incurred for the normal functioning of the government departments and various services, interest payments on debt incurred by the government, and grants given to

NPP has done that. With NPP doing very well in the Garo region but not so much in the Khasi-Jaintia region Conrad Sangma has got the right to be the Chief Minister and not Presone Tywong. A Khasi According to the demand will also create a wrong precedent for the future. Will the Khasi-Jaintia reciprocate if the Garo makes a similar demand in the future?

The other problem which seems to have missed the attention of most is that even if a possible MLAs from HSPDP come back and the non-NPP group wins the Soibam by-poll they will still not have majority. The best case scenario is that it will be 50:50 which opens the possibility for President's rule and re-election. Will the non-NPP group MLAs be willing to go by the MLAs from HSPDP government is only possible if they can create defections from the NPP group. Apart from being difficult and a hypocritical move, the only possibility available is asking the independent MLAs to change camps. But both of the independent MLAs are Garo who will need to be convinced of the need for a Khasi-Jaintia Chief Minister instead of someone from their own community. Still even if that is possible there is another hurdle.

The biggest surprise thrown by the 2023 elections is the emergence of Voice of People's Party (VPP) led by Arden Miller Basaitawm who after losing in the 2018 assembly elections left HSPDP to start his own party. It won four seats and the performance of the group shows that it will do well in the upcoming local MDC elections as well. Fighting on the issue of anti-corruption it is able to generate a lot of interest among the electorate. Corruption maybe the catchphrase used officially but its core ideology is that of anti-judiciary and the soil of the soil politics. The speech made by Arden Basaitawm in Moulthbar where he demanded that Khasi boys moving out of their own land in Jailroad, Police Bazar, Polo and Lahan cannot act like they are in their own land (jingling tarai ha rai jing) is a very good ideology of the party. To be fair to him

he did qualify it by saying he is not trying to incite people to discriminate against anyone but is just telling the truth. People on the ground knew the ideology of the party and in fact decided to vote for it in large numbers because of it. The ideology again reappears in the list of demands released by the party for entering into an alliance for forming a new government. It is his list of demands that will be the stumbling block, two demands in particular.

The first demand in the list is zero tolerance on corruption, a popular demand and a reasonable one. But since UDP, PDF and HSPDP were in previous corrupt NPP-led government does joining a group in which any or all of the three parties belong not against the ideology of VPP? But let's assume that the issue of having a Khasi-Jaintia Chief Minister is bigger than that of corruption and they do decide to come together, the demand in the list of reviewing the State Reservation Policy will be another sticking point.

The review of existing 48-40 formula is meant to give more shares to the Khasi-Jaintia because of their larger population share. Will the Congress and TMC (All India Trinamool Congress) who have candidates from the Khasi-Jaintia region as well the Garo region accept such a demand? Will UDP which totally votes polled. Likewise, the Congress, which lost all its stalwarts in other parties, ended up with a tally of only 13 seats. Its percentage of total votes share fell to a little over 13%. Ms. Santa Mary Shylla, a little known NPP woman candidate, defeated Vincent Pata, the State Congress Chief and sitting MP from Shillong. The elections is also the BJP's pride. The party which was part of the Conrad-led MDA government severed its relations with the NPP and fielded its candidates in all 60 seats. It is a high-profile campaign. Its national leaders started endorsing the MDA government to be the most corrupt and inefficient government and Meghalaya the most corrupt state in the country. The national media also projected around 10 seats for the BJP and expected it to play the kingmaker's role in Meghalaya. But the results came as a shock to the BJP, as it just managed to hold on to the two seats that it won in 2018.

The United Democratic Party (UDP), a regional party which was an alliance partner, increased its vote share to over 16 percent and its seats tally to eleven, five more than what it got in 2018. Voice of People's Party (VPP), a new militant party with its support base in Khasi-Jaintia Hills, could secure four seats. PDF and HSPDP, the other two regional parties got two seats each. Two independent candidates also won. The KAM, which fielded three candidates and ran a campaign raising several relevant issues, won the hearts of the people looking for an alternative politics, but could not win any seats.

Conrad's ride to power is not smooth. The miseries in his government faced charges of corruption and inefficiency. The Assam-Meghalaya banker agreement that he initiated was not the satisfaction of certain civil society organizations in the state. Conrad was accused of not doing enough when the Assam police killed five villagers in Mulkhni, a village bordering Assam. Incidents such as the collapse of the level dome at the recently constituted Assembly building, jathi-crane on the ageing locomotor and the police encounter of Christiferfield Thangkha as a co-militant leader in Shillong, were also widely condemned by the public. The MDA's poor governance in the education, health, and public distribution sectors was also highlighted in the media.

Notwithstanding the accusations, Conrad Sangma commands a positive image as a young, intelligent, far-seeing and amiable leader. Some development and welfare initiatives that he has taken up during his tenure added to his popularity. But more than his charisma and achievements, political dynamics in the state appeared to have come to his help. Until 2018, only the Congress Party had its presence both in the Garo Hills and Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The local ethnic and regional parties were confined to parts of the hills. In a state where ethnicity, sub-nationalism and personality-based politics dominated, there was no other party in the state which had support in all the three hill regions of Meghalaya. Even when P. A Sangma formed the MDA in 2018, it hardly had any takers in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The political situation, however, changed after the death of P. Sangma in 2016.

Mukul Sangma was the Chief Minister for over seven years from 2010 to 2018. He was an able administrator, but some of his own colleagues in the Congress party found him arrogant and dictatorial. Mukul Sangma was elected as the government in 2018, even though the Congress then emerged as the largest single party. Conrad, being the son of legendary P. Sangma, had an advantage in the Garo Hills. But what came in his favour was the victory of many bigwigs such as Presone Tywong, Santa Shyllong Dhar and Coming One Yemban in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills who joined the NPP. After Conrad formed the government, Pata, the State Congress high command yielded to the anti-Mukul lobby and in his place installed his rival, Vincent Pata, as the state chief. Mukul Sangma, who could not accept the high command decision, left the Congress party in protest along with eleven other Congress MLAs and joined the Trinamool Congress (TMC). The move led to the decline of the Congress party and helped the further consolidation of the NPP. The NPP leaders, who are wealthy, spent a lot of money during the election campaign to retain or attract the voters' attention. But apart from the money factor, the inability of the leaders of Congress, TMC and the BJP to see themselves as potential alternatives to Conrad Sangma, facilitated the victory of the NPP.

The final election tally shows NPP is only short of five seats required for forming the government. It is not necessary for the NPP to have a majority to form the government. If Conrad wants to be elected as an alliance partner, he needs to form the next government. However, Conrad finds it useful to have BJP as an alliance partner, as the Hill state, which lacks resources, depends on the centre for finances. Although the BJP played no role in the NPP's victory, it makes pragmatic sense to keep the BJP in good humour as long as it remains in power at the centre. It is a humiliation for the BJP to join the government after making much hue and cry against Conrad Sangma's misrule. Still, the BJP's national leadership is not doing enough when the Assam police killed five villagers in Mulkhni, a village bordering Assam. Incidents such as the collapse of the level dome at the recently constituted Assembly building, jathi-crane on the ageing locomotor and the police encounter of Christiferfield Thangkha as a co-militant leader in Shillong, were also widely condemned by the public. The MDA's poor governance in the education, health, and public distribution sectors was also highlighted in the media.

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Mind it, it's yet another Conrad led government

By H Srikanth

A couple of days before the assembly elections, when Conrad Sangma claimed that his party, the NPP would repeat what William Sangma did in 1972, many thought that it was nothing more than a political rhetoric. But the final tally shows Conrad is almost correct in his prediction. The NPP won 26 out of 59 seats. Apart from retaining 15 MLA seats, the NPP could wrest 11 seats from other parties. It got 18 seats in the Garo Hills and 8 seats in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Its total vote share is around 31 percent which is more than the combined vote share of the Congress and the TMC.

The media projected Mukul Sangma, who left the Congress Party and joined TMC in 2021, as a potential challenger to Conrad Sangma. Mamma Banerjee saw in the elections the possibility of expanding the TMC's influence beyond Bengal. Despite tall electoral promises that Mukul made to the voters, the TMC ended up with just five seats -- four from the Garo Hills and one from the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Mukul Sangma, who contested in two constituencies, was defeated in one, and Vincent Pata, the State Congress Chief and sitting MP, defeated Mukul's other family members, contesting the elections. The TMC received less than 4 percent of the total votes polled. Likewise, the Congress, which lost all its stalwarts in other parties, ended up with a tally of only 13 seats. Its percentage of total votes share fell to a little over 13%. Ms. Santa Mary Shylla, a little known NPP woman candidate, defeated Vincent Pata, the State Congress Chief and sitting MP from Shillong. The elections is also the BJP's pride. The party which was part of the Conrad-led MDA government severed its relations with the NPP and fielded its candidates in all 60 seats. It is a high-profile campaign. Its national leaders started endorsing the MDA government to be the most corrupt and inefficient government and Meghalaya the most corrupt state in the country. The national media also projected around 10 seats for the BJP and expected it to play the kingmaker's role in Meghalaya. But the results came as a shock to the BJP, as it just managed to hold on to the two seats that it won in 2018.

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Mukul Sangma was the Chief Minister for over seven years from 2010 to 2018. He was an able administrator, but some of his own colleagues in the Congress party found him arrogant and dictatorial. Mukul Sangma was elected as the government in 2018, even though the Congress then emerged as the largest single party. Conrad, being the son of legendary P. Sangma, had an advantage in the Garo Hills. But what came in his favour was the victory of many bigwigs such as Presone Tywong, Santa Shyllong Dhar and Coming One Yemban in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills who joined the NPP. After Conrad formed the government, Pata, the State Congress high command yielded to the anti-Mukul lobby and in his place installed his rival, Vincent Pata, as the state chief. Mukul Sangma, who could not accept the high command decision, left the Congress party in protest along with eleven other Congress MLAs and joined the Trinamool Congress (TMC). The move led to the decline of the Congress party and helped the further consolidation of the NPP. The NPP leaders, who are wealthy, spent a lot of money during the election campaign to retain or attract the voters' attention. But apart from the money factor, the inability of the leaders of Congress, TMC and the BJP to see themselves as potential alternatives to Conrad Sangma, facilitated the victory of the NPP.

The final election tally shows NPP is only short of five seats required for forming the government. It is not necessary for the NPP to have a majority to form the government. If Conrad wants to be elected as an alliance partner, he needs to form the next government. However, Conrad finds it useful to have BJP as an alliance partner, as the Hill state, which lacks resources, depends on the centre for finances. Although the BJP played no role in the NPP's victory, it makes pragmatic sense to keep the BJP in good humour as long as it remains in power at the centre. It is a humiliation for the BJP to join the government after making much hue and cry against Conrad Sangma's misrule. Still, the BJP's national leadership is not doing enough when the Assam police killed five villagers in Mulkhni, a village bordering Assam. Incidents such as the collapse of the level dome at the recently constituted Assembly building, jathi-crane on the ageing locomotor and the police encounter of Christiferfield Thangkha as a co-militant leader in Shillong, were also widely condemned by the public. The MDA's poor governance in the education, health, and public distribution sectors was also highlighted in the media.

Notwithstanding the accusations, Conrad Sangma commands a positive image as a young, intelligent, far-seeing and amiable leader. Some development and welfare initiatives that he has taken up during his tenure added to his popularity. But more than his charisma and achievements, political dynamics in the state appeared to have come to his help. Until 2018, only the Congress Party had its presence both in the Garo Hills and Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The local ethnic and regional parties were confined to parts of the hills. In a state where ethnicity, sub-nationalism and personality-based politics dominated, there was no other party in the state which had support in all the three hill regions of Meghalaya. Even when P. A Sangma formed the MDA in 2018, it hardly had any takers in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The political situation, however, changed after the death of P. Sangma in 2016.

Letters to the Editor

Online voting impossible

Editor, "Online voting facility" (ST, February 28, 2023). I beg to disagree with the suggestion put forward for a very need of the EVMS to be internet linked is in itself adequate proof that online voting is impossible. Let us come down to ground realities that make voting fair and secret. A person enters the polling room in which is present the presiding officer who is well-trained in event of any possible eventuality. The EPIC card is handed over to the officer in charge. The officer would call aloud the name of the voter so that polling agents can scrutinise the face of the voter since polling agents are from the locality of the voter. After the face recognition is tallied with data in the register, the voter then proceeds into the polling booth to press the button on the candidate of his/her choice. Herein lies the problem. In online voting the EPIC card would need digitalisation too (ATM like). Next, who will perform the job of polling agents? Let us leave aside the challenge votes of a few rupees. If the voter is proven to be an impostor would he/she be subject to legal action? Lastly, voting is done all alone after the voter is being inked to prevent multiple voting like in the old era of rigging or booth capturing. Lastly, voting is done all alone inside an enclosure. At home or anywhere else friends might influence the

voter, worse is if the voter is under duress. These are a few obstacles to the possibility of online voting.

In conclusion, let us acknowledge the limitations of modern digitalisation. Let us be realistic and accept the suggestion put forward for a very need of the EVMS to be internet linked is in itself adequate proof that online voting is impossible. Let us come down to ground realities that make voting fair and secret. A person enters the polling room in which is present the presiding officer who is well-trained in event of any possible eventuality. The EPIC card is handed over to the officer in charge. The officer would call aloud the name of the voter so that polling agents can scrutinise the face of the voter since polling agents are from the locality of the voter. After the face recognition is tallied with data in the register, the voter then proceeds into the polling booth to press the button on the candidate of his/her choice. Herein lies the problem. In online voting the EPIC card would need digitalisation too (ATM like). Next, who will perform the job of polling agents? Let us leave aside the challenge votes of a few rupees. If the voter is proven to be an impostor would he/she be subject to legal action? Lastly, voting is done all alone after the voter is being inked to prevent multiple voting like in the old era of rigging or booth capturing. Lastly, voting is done all alone inside an enclosure. At home or anywhere else friends might influence the

A very sad election result for Meghalaya 2023

Editor,

The results of the recently completed Meghalaya Assembly elections are out and the NPP - BJP - HSPDP - Independents will mostly be forming the government. This is a very sad election result for Meghalaya because it means 50 years of corruption, under-development, load-shedding, delayed salaries, scams, illegal coal mining, and more. It's sad that people were quick to forget all that has happened in the past 5 years. These are not mere accusations but actually backed by sufficient data.

1. Corruption As per the State Finance Audit Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, as of 31 March 2021, 215 Utilisation Certificates amounting to INR 1765.86 crores were outstanding for submission to INR 2000. According to the report which is public information, " Huge pendency in submission of UC's in frauds with the risk of fraud and misappropriation of funds. It is imperative that the State Government should monitor

this aspect closely." Every-one can go to the official CAG websites and read this themselves.

2. Under-development and mismanagement of State finances We all know very well about that collapsed, the shoddy ISBT construction and we are no strangers to public places everywhere which is a clear sign of the so-called "development" provided by this MDA government.

The GDP of the state during the Financial Year 2016-17 was INR 1,53,51,669 crores and during the Financial Year 2020-21 was INR 1,97,45,670 crores which is an abysmally low 28.2% growth over a span of 4 years.

The Total Outstanding Liabilities to GDP ratio of the state has bloated from 32.74% in the Financial Year 2016-17 to 40.73% in the Financial Year 2020-21 when the target provided by the MFRBM Act, 2006 is 28%. This is a very bad sign and as a State will have a very tough time paying back the loans in the future.

Now let us look at the trend of the Revenue Deficit Surplus of the state which is the gap between Revenue Expenditure and Revenue Receipts. Revenue expenditure relates to those expenses incurred for the normal functioning of the government departments and various services, interest payments on debt incurred by the government, and grants given to

various institutions. Revenue Receipt consists of tax revenue, non-tax revenue, share of Union Taxes, Duties, and grants from the Government of India. In the Financial Year 2016-17, the state had a Revenue Surplus of INR 602.41 crores which means that Receipts exceeded Expenditure by INR 602.41 crores.

During the financial years of 2019-20 and 2020-21, the state witnessed revenue deficits against of INR 151.60 crores and INR 151.88 crores respectively which clearly indicates how inefficient the MDA government is in managing the state's coffers.

The next time to look at would be the Fiscal Deficit of the State. The Fiscal Deficit is the difference between the Revenue Receipts plus Non-Debt Capital Receipts and the Total Expenditure. Fiscal Deficit is reflective of the total borrowing requirements of the Government. According to the MFRBM Act, 2006 is 28%. This is a very bad sign and as a State will have a very tough time paying back the loans in the future.

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tough ride in the next decade. I hope that they will change their ways even though I doubt that they will. After all, they have proven how grandly they are.

For a minute, there was hope that the new government would be formed but then before we knew it, the 2 independents and 2 HSPDP MLAs went ahead and pledged their allegiance to the corrupt NPP government. I hope that the people remember how these 4 MLAs betrayed everyone who voted for them against the NPP.

There is a glimmer of hope for the future though with the emergence of the Voice of the People's Party. Even though they won only 4 seats, the wins by the VPP especially against the bigwigs with a lot of money showed that there are some people out there who will not be influenced by money but who actually want to see clean politics and a zero corruption government. I hope and pray that the members of the VPP will stick to their principles in the next 5 years and come out stronger in 2028. If they stick to their principles over the next 5 years, the VPP may be just the party that Meghalaya needs to turn the tide. I also hope that the VPP can find a strong, young and fresh candidate for the upcoming MP elections in 2024 who can stand on the same anti-corruption principles. We need a change. It may not have happened in 2023 but the foundation has been laid for a big change in the next decade.

Your etc., Shaiyam Khanumudil Via email

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"Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions" — Gilbert K. Chesterton

The Shillong Times

Vol No. 134, No. 108 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 8, 2023

Tongue-lashing abroad

RAHUL Gandhi's address at Cambridge University was on expected lines: the Congress leader went on a tirade against the BJP-led NDA government and used his address to the MBA students as another occasion to target Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The main thrust of his speech was that democracy was facing an existential crisis in this country; so much so that he had to undertake a Bharat Jodo Yatra to communicate directly with the people. He said that as it may, democracy in this country, with all its challenges is vibrant as was evident from the elections held in three-states of the North-East, where rival political formations fought the elections in a normal manner. It was natural for a ruling party to use its influence with community elders, which had been happening in the elections under the Congress-UPA rule as well. Even the Opposition in these three states had no valid grounds to argue that the cause of democracy was subverted. The Election Commission carries with it the authority to oversee the elections in an impartial manner. It is to the credit of India that the process of democracy is maturing over the years.

Rahul Gandhi is well within his rights to criticise the government. At the same time, it will be well appreciated if he exhibits some restraint while speaking to an audience abroad. National interests require that leaders from all shades present a good image of the nation while they are abroad; and this applies also in discussions about the way India treats its minorities. Granted that the BJP's pro-Hindu and anti-minority stances are causes of concern but there are to be addressed within the country rather than on foreign soil considering that the British once colonised this country. India is a mosaic of different races, cultures, religions, castes and languages. As is often noted, the only way to exist here is to co-exist. The last nine years of the Modi government have seen it being less aggressive and perhaps more mellow.

The aggressiveness of leaders like Pravin Togadia, against the minorities, is a thing of the past essentially because society disapproves of such offensives. Secularism is the dominant concern in this country not just because the Congress party holds it aloft but also because the wider society is peace-loving. The stragglers need to be tackled and put in their place. The Congress leader had not served the cause of the nation when he uttered during his Bharat Jodo Yatra's last lap in Kashmir that the Congress party, when re-elected to power, would restore the special status for the province. Abrogation of Article 370 was a calculated step by the Modi government that has helped restore peace in Kashmir to a large extent.

Letters to the Editor

Shameless BJP!

Your etc., K Thanghluoc, Shillong. When the BJP government came to power in 2014 under Prime Minister Modi, their rallying cry was to free India from corruption. All of us were living in that hope that this government will really end the number of scams that the country was facing all those years. But then came the Nirav Modi case; still we gave the BJP government the benefit of doubt and hoped that Mr Nirav Modi would be brought to justice. But sadly, that did not happen. Similarly, when Home Minister Amit Shah came to Meghalaya and said that Meghalaya was on the number one list as the most corrupt state in the country, many of us were optimistic that the BJP will end the corruption that plagues the state, but here again it was all talk because after the declaration of election results, the BJP with only two MLAs in the state assembly was quick to lead support to the NPP-led government once again. Is the NPP not the party accused of corruption by the BJP? The State unit president of the BJP has election campaign said that the BJP government in the centre will send a CBI inquiry to investigate against all the corrupt on allegations of the previous MDA government, but he was the

The 11th Assembly has been constituted and the MDA 2.0 government has already been sworn with Conrad Sangma as the 12th Chief Minister for the second straight term. The chief minister and other would-be ministers were seen attending a short prayer service led by Archbishop of Shillong, Rt. Rev. Victor Lyngdoh. There is nothing wrong with it only that if tomorrow a sadha or a mullah is invited then there should be no complaints. In a secular country prayer is private. It is understood that the function took place in the Chief Minister's chamber. Is it a private space? More importantly politicians invoke God before assuming office but ungodly activities do take place while in public service. More about the swearing in ceremony on the website of Prime Minister Narendra Modi later but for the time being we look back before beholding the future.

VPP the surprise package The Voice of the People's Party is the surprise package of the general elections 2023. The newest home-grown party exceed expectations by winning four seats.

The most sensational win came from Mawliat where the voice of Brightstar and Mubhanjan left two heavy weights, UDP's candidate and the former MLA, P. Sankar and NPP's P. Tebor Pathway behind leading many to shower accolades on the Constituency calling the electorate the smartest lot. The election speeches of the educated candidates reached all the nooks and corners of the state. The citizens of the state, particularly the youth were impressed by the ideology, ideals and vision of the 2021 floated party. The popularity of VPP caused a flutter in political circles. The campaign focused on plans to weed out corruption and cleanse the political system while vehemently blaming the MDA-1 for its 'high level' culture and alleged perpetuation of scams and corruption. Besides the programs, Arden Bhasinai, Maybren Lyngdoh from Pynhombhrakh (who could not make it to the Legislative Assembly) filling short of numbers pitted as he was against the long serving legislator, AL Hekki was a hit. The ex-ad hoc teacher who famously called out the 'unholy alliance' for purchasing the expressive Lamborghi while his then constituency has no road, captivated everyone with his oratorical skills. There are already calls for him to

Soon after parting ways with the NPP at the last term, the UPP, HSP, DP and PIP repeatedly screamed in public that the 'High Level' belonged to the NPP alone. However, not long after the declaration of results, they even 'betrayed' the people and lined up to hand over letters of support to the party they hated during the campaigns. They don't mind sitting on the 'roof' of the NPP but reserved for them to pressure Lyngdoh. These contradictions will be suppressed for the sake of power and will re-emerge in 2027-28. Freaching during election is only to fool the people for five years as

Corruption should not be tolerated

When the situation reaches the tipping point, a friend might also behave like an enemy. Following the arrest of the Delhi cabinet Minister - Manish Sisodia, his party colleague Saubhik Bhandari burst out before the public that one should not worry about being arrested in Delhi. The MLA assured the crowd that the arrested AAP leaders could have lots of fun (smile) on the jail. He was insistent because the Delhi jail comes under his government. He was seemingly oblivious to the impact of his outburst that might damage the party's credibility. Interestingly, Bharat Jodo Yatra statement came months later many CCTV images of AAP's Health Minister Satyendra Ram (delightfully luxuriating in his prison cell) leaked on social media. Some video clippings from within the jail went viral in December 2022, showing the Minister, who was arrested in a money laundering case, reclining in luxury. Chief Minister Manish Sisodia by CBI on February 26 has certainly raised

More power to the VPP

By Albert Thyriang

confront the MP elections next year. The aspirational youths of the state see in the "Prak" (winner, symbol of VPP) their only hope. The message of VPP went up manifold when the party placed their terms and conditions in exchange for their support to any government. Who will not admire the stand in ruling out any truck with the NPP and BJP for the five years of corruption and misrule? And for the common tag? Who will not support the insistence of doing away with the VPP culture in the state? Who will not appreciate the firmness to adopt austere measures to avoid unnecessary government expenditure, like political appointments? After the failed and halfhearted attempt to form a regional government led by the disgraced UDP, the only party that can hold its head high is the VPP. It is now the most favoured political party in the eastern part of the state. Contradictions under the umbrella BJP's strong man, Amit Shah called Meghalaya the most corrupt state in the country. In the recent results were out the party invited Conrad Sangma to meet Himant Biswa Sarma to discuss government formation. The BJP was the first to offer support to the NPP soon after the results. Without any shame left, the BJP embraced the very party that provided over that most corrupt administration. The claim of zero tolerance to corruption has been one and for all deflated. Conrad Sangma in the meantime warned TMC's supremo, Manojit Barua that her newly elected MLAs would join the BJP soon after March 2nd but he had no connection with the TMC's biggest rival.

Soon after parting ways with the NPP at the last term, the UPP, HSP, DP and PIP repeatedly screamed in public that the 'High Level' belonged to the NPP alone. However, not long after the declaration of results, they even 'betrayed' the people and lined up to hand over letters of support to the party they hated during the campaigns. They don't mind sitting on the 'roof' of the NPP but reserved for them to pressure Lyngdoh. These contradictions will be suppressed for the sake of power and will re-emerge in 2027-28. Freaching during election is only to fool the people for five years as many eyebrows. He is allegedly involved in deliberately invoking the Expec policy favouring top oligarchs and receiving 'kickback' therefrom. The policy was later withdrawn as it exposed the blatant irregularities in the AAP ministries. What really made the public more suspicious is the fact that Deputy CM Manish Sisodia and 34 others accused in the scam had allegedly changed as many as 140 mobile phones to disguise the digital evidence. CBI has been taken up the case with all seriousness. Amidst the heat of political chaos, Congress leader Dr. Sandeep Dutt pleaded with Delhi Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena a couple of days ago to take a firm stand against Arvind Kejriwal and his scam. He claimed that AAP leaders are involved in various corruption cases, including advertisements and 'misusing' of funds received from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). What is ironic is that the party that rose to prominence as the 'betler than' at a time no one's top leaders being pulled up by the courts while many have been arrested in various corruption charges, including involvement during the 2020 Delhi riots that also saw many journalists being let off scot-free. Prashant Bhoshan, Kumar Vishwas, Shazia Ilmi, Kapil

Mishra, Aika Lamba, and Yogendra Yadav are some of the key confidantes of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, who were either removed by him or left the party as they believed that their boss deviated from the party principles and ethics. It may be noted that these and other party leaders were the first to publicly shout out that scum from the pit of the AAP. The most intellectual and erudite leader Kumar Vishwas has often explicitly spoken out in a public forum that the top party leaders never hesitated in making friends with those forces who openly pose a threat to the sovereignty and integrity of the nation. Dr. Manish Barua, a neurologist from Chicago and a party founder member has also spoken out in a complete documentary film - "Transparency: Parashita" exposing how and why many defectors and founder members left the AAP that was formed on ethical principles to eradicate corruption.

As soon as the polls were over Meghalaya's chief minister Conrad Sangma was summoned to Guwahati by his Assam counterpart regarding government formation post confirmation of results. There is nothing new. His seen that

VIP culture goes berserk

Being a concerned citizen of the state, it saddens me that such an auspicious occasion mentioned above has angered every common man and woman of the State. With the trial preparations and no entry sign boards in every nook and corner of Shillong, commencing from point A to point H has become a mammoth task. Furthermore, it baffles me why the Education Department is not giving a holiday or cancelling the ongoing examination as we know the coming of the VPP and the amount of 'No Entry' signboards will create massive traffic jams which will hamper the students from reaching their respective examination centres. With reference to the above context, I humbly request the authority to take note of this and in future de-note of this and it will not affect the students appearing for their final board examinations. Yours etc., Salil Gwal, Shillong. Assistant Professor, Via email

Assam has been taking decisions for Meghalaya. The Assam-Meghalaya border talks were at the best of Assam chief minister. The MOU was signed at the pleasure of the most powerful BJP man in the neighbouring state. In the next five years more and more developments will take place to prove that our leaders are only 'yes' men to the diktat of our 'big brother'.

Mukul too responsible The biggest losers in the February 2023 elections are the Congress and Mukul Sangma. NPP came back to power because of the split in the Congress. When the chips were down the two-time chief minister deserted the grand old party. Had he been patient and stuck around with the Congress he would have been at the helm of affairs again by now. Mukul is the one who left the IML along with 12 MLAs. Now he has only five elected 'followers'. He has managed to marginalise the Congress at the same time reducing the grand old party to as many seats. There is no doubt that the TMC and the Congress split votes benefited the NPP and the regional parties. If there was no exodus the INC would have secured an easy majority. The Sangsalk legislator tried to intercede to cobble up numbers for an alternative anti-NPP BJP alliance but from day one his failure for such a dream was looming large.

BJP State The BJP has to be satisfied again with 2 seats from its strongholds, Pynhombhrakh and Lakshap. The position of the saffron party has been static for ever since it made an entry in the state in the 1980s. This time the party contested in 59 constituencies promising to return with sufficient numbers to install a 'Modi Sarkar' in the state as well. However, the electorate rejected the 'saubhik-sankha' while the 'saubhik-sankha' party handsomely. Modi does not seem to have much impact here and the party is struggling to rid the shoulders of the NPP. The RSS and other groups, wings of the BJP and effectively of NPP as opposed to HTO to a question in Parliament, he revealed that half of the total encroached forest land was in the state of Assam alone. Nearly 377,500 odd hectares of the State's forest land has so far been encroached. It is around 13% of the forest area. While the BJP government has taken it seriously and led an anti-encroachment drive to evict 'encroachers' from nearly 1,900 hectares of forest and revenue land in areas, the exercise has got mired in

encroachers with gross negligence. And finally, there is a need of promoting deliberate underdevelopment in ecologically sensitive regions. Though it is a commendable effort, the rebuilding of India must be closely tied to de-populating certain overburdened areas of the country. A clear policy on what areas should be available to tourism, what be limited tourism and no-go areas is essential. Land is vital not just for agricultural production but for the economy. We cannot afford to lose land, especially in a country like India, where the density of population is quite high compared to most other countries. But with climate change, land will be affected in various ways, primarily due to desertification. Thus, environmentalists from across the country need to come forward to evolve an effective strategy to save land and forests to optimise the available resource. —INFA

Land, forest encroachment

Pervasive, clarity vital

By Dhrujati Mukherjee

The encroachment of land and forests in the country is not just physical and blamely visible but masked by statistics. Millions of hectares of forests, grassland and game sanctuaries are encroached upon by either the local population or due to excessive tourism and commerce. The latter goes in the name of development, but without much concern about the long-term sustainability of land subsidence where in recent developments in Jashimhat, Uttarakhnad, are a testimony. Forests are cleared regularly for industrial parks, two-time commercial plantations and grazing tree cover of around 10 million hectares are destroyed each year. The damage inflicted is so pervasive and complex in many cases, it is irreversible and may take many decades to repair. Besides small-scale encroachment, there is an institutional policy that is not institutional policy to contain the destruction and reverse it. Following an investigation carried out by national daily The Indian Express, the country's population is nearly doubled since 1981. Its livestock numbers have increased by over a quarter in at least 25,000 sq km of forest land have either been diverted or encroached. Interestingly, it found that while Ludhiana, Haryana, India's Capital, is known as the seat of power and home to men and women who run the country, but 'what's not so well known is that the bangalows of ministers and senior officers, even the RBI building on Sansad Marg, are 'forests' in the official forest cover map. Parts of the campuses of IIT and AIIMS, and residential neighbourhoods around New Delhi are also 'forests'. Further, for over four decades, around one-fifth of the area has been recently under green cover on government records. Successive governments have not made public the primary data of the country's forest cover. In August last year, Union Environment Minister Bhupendra Patel stated nearly 7,400 sq km of India's forest land has been encroached. He also asked a question in Parliament, he revealed that half of the total encroached forest land was in the state of Assam alone. Nearly 377,500 odd hectares of the State's forest land has so far been encroached. It is around 13% of the forest area. While the BJP government has taken it seriously and led an anti-encroachment drive to evict 'encroachers' from nearly 1,900 hectares of forest and revenue land in areas, the exercise has got mired in encroachers with gross negligence. And finally, there is a need of promoting deliberate underdevelopment in ecologically sensitive regions. Though it is a commendable effort, the rebuilding of India must be closely tied to de-populating certain overburdened areas of the country. A clear policy on what areas should be available to tourism, what be limited tourism and no-go areas is essential. Land is vital not just for agricultural production but for the economy. We cannot afford to lose land, especially in a country like India, where the density of population is quite high compared to most other countries. But with climate change, land will be affected in various ways, primarily due to desertification. Thus, environmentalists from across the country need to come forward to evolve an effective strategy to save land and forests to optimise the available resource. —INFA

The author is Sr. Consultant & Guest Faculty of Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Kolkata; an avowed writer and speaker on issues such as social and economic development. She is also a member of the Indian Council for Environmental Studies.

"It is the fight alone that pleases us, not the victory."

— Blaise Pascal

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LV, No. 284 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 09, 2023

MDA.0 the way forward

THIRTY six hours after the swearing-in ceremony on March 7, the portfolios have not been allocated to respective ministers. In a coalition government allocating portfolios is an arduous task but that task has to be completed sooner than later because governance cannot be kept in abeyance. A new minister taking over a department, especially a rank newcomer into the ministry, would need time to familiarise himself/herself with the rules of business. Some Departments more than others have been the focus of the electorate and political aspirants during the election campaign. They include Education, Health, Agriculture, Tourism, Roads, Water Supply, Power among others. These were the departments that were seen to be lagging behind. Though not much focus was given to Community and Rural Development (CARD) this is a key department — a fulcrum around which rural development is centred. This Department requires strict monitoring since most central schemes and the MNRREGA are routed through it. While MNRREGA has worked to an extent in creating community assets by way of Gopaths and interior roads, fish ponds etc., other infrastructure remains incomplete.

The Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana or the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) remains largely on paper. Rural livelihoods have not taken off and this is one reason for large scale urban migration. Poverty is writ large on the faces of rural folks who depend largely on agriculture that has remained largely unproductive. Farming on small farmlands which are taken on lease is a precarious livelihood option. It is time for the Department of Economics and Statistics to get to work and capture authentic data on the number of BPL households and rural landlessness. The last socio-economic caste survey was conducted in 2011. It found 76% of rural Meghalayans landless. This is 2023. Have things got better? Did the Government of Meghalaya undertake any intervention to address the landlessness issue?

Next is the Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY), a village development project launched by the Government of India in October 2014, under which each Member of Parliament will take the responsibility of developing physical and institutional infrastructure in three villages by 2019. The goal is to develop three Adarsh Grams by March 2019, of which one would be achieved by 2016. Thereafter, five such Adarsh Grams (one per year) will be selected and developed by 2024. On this we have only heard of one Raja Sabha MP adopting Komthong village and the nearby villages too. Then we have the Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rural Mission (SPMRM) which aims at developing 3000 Rural clusters, in the next five years. The aim of this scheme is to develop a cluster of villages that preserve and nurture the sense of rural community life with focus on equity and inclusiveness without compromising with the facilities perceived to be essentially urban in nature, thus creating a cluster of "Rural Villages". The purpose is to stimulate local economic development while enhancing basic services and creating well planned Rural clusters. The villagers don't know of many of these schemes and hence cannot access them. With weak or no monitoring most schemes are completed only on paper. Meghalaya needs a robust monitoring mechanism. Business as usual will no longer work.

Letters to the Editor

People's aspirations versus leaders' politicking

Editor, Here I go again on my own — a song by the rock group Whitesnake which was popular in 1987' does sum up the mood of the electorate who had been taken for a ride in these last few months culminating in the recent government formation.

Elections are undoubtedly fought on many factors such as issues, ideology, Religion, Promises etc. The central theme this time was a vote for change and governance. In every rally and in every speech, all of the NPPs main allies the UDP, PDF, and BJP went hammer and tongs on the misrule of the NPP. Speeches were replete with anti-NPP misdeeds, mismanagement, corruption, high-handedness, seams and the list goes on. The clarion call was for a dire need for regional parties to come up strong. They even batted that it is time for a Khasi Jaintia CM. Allies who were part of the MDA-1 claimed they were stultified to voice their opinions. Some threatened to pull out (all bare no), and confessions of being offered handsomely to be part

of the NPP party. In fact, if one were to scan all the pre-election interviews of these candidates it was just one recurring anti-NPP theme played over and over. The electorate danced to these tunes with the expectations of an NPP free government in this new term. Talk on the streets among us commoners was if we have another 5 years of the NPP-led government, we are doomed.

People who voted for other parties apart from the NPP and BJP voted for this belief and expectation. The absence of any prepolitic alliances also cemented this fact and assured the people, that this time they meant business. BUT alas...

The question that comes up now is that when representatives have won on this mandate, it was an acceptance by the people on the foundations and ideology for which they have stood for and garnered votes on. The past was forged. When you now make a U-turn and defy your own electorate, can you really not be held accountable? By which stretch of imagination can you still claim to be the people's representative when you have gone against what they have believed in your contract with them? Can we then still say that this is a government by the people, for the people? The warning was given that we would be given five years; we fooled

Millet, the crop of the past for the future

By HH Mohrmen

Krai, kre, chan, or misai is the name by which the people in the different parts of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills call millet. In the past, it was one of the most important crops in the region but was neglected. However, today it is being seen as an important crop the world over. Like rice or wheat, millet is a cereal, but it is referred to as a "coarse cereal" because of its rough texture. Pius Ramee of NESFAS informed me that in the Khasi Hills, farmers grow five types of millet: krai-muh, krai-fan, krai-jashch, krai-kew, and krai-shan. In Jaintia hills, rice is a popular crop for the people who live on the plateaus, and it is on the southern slope, where farmers practise jhum cultivation, that millet was a popular crop.

Millet is their mainstay. People who lived in the border area and are now in their late sixties and early eighties shared stories about the time when millet was their major food item. My mother, who was born in Nongtalang, used to reminisce about the days when she was a kid and when millet was their main meal. She recalled the time when "gri chan," or millet-rice, which comprises rice and millet, was their mainstay. This story is common among the War people who live in the southern slopes of the state. In some areas, millet was also fermented to make traditional beer, but unlike rice, millet has never been used to make snacks.

NESFAS story with millet It started in 2010, when NESFAS organised its first food festival and farmers from Nongtalang shared the story of the importance of millet to the Khasi and Jaintia. They expressed a wish to promote the crop. In 2011, at the Slow Food Festival in Sweden, the millet network made a declaration on the importance of millet. In 2012, at the festival that was held in Taini, priority was given to millet, which was then neglected. Now 65 communities through the ALC's NESFAS and its partners were able to promote millet in the states of North East India.

No woman, no Krai It was Phrang Roy founder and former chairman of NESFAS who came up with the statement "no woman, no krai" in 2012. The saying, which is a twist on the title of a song, was borrowed from

Bob Marley's popular song "No Woman, No Cry." With due respect to the legendary reggae king, the statement refers to the importance of women in millet cultivation. In millet cultivation, particularly in jhum cultivation, women play a very important role; in fact, without women, no jhum cultivation can happen as their role is very vital. It may be mentioned that the famous "long hat" tradition of the Wars of Jaintia which is related to millet cultivation, was also performed predominantly by women. Millet cultivation amongst the people in the Khasi and Jaintia hills therefore has a strong connection with women.

Long-hat is weeding tradition Millet cultivation is associated with jhum, or slash and burn cultivation, and has been part of the people's culture and traditions since a long time ago. In the War Jaintia area, a tradition called "long hat," which is a weeding practice is connected to jhum cultivation. Long-hat is a community support system where lamens donate one day's labour to support members of their respective communities. During the weeding time, farmers would extend support to each other by working as each other's jhum field.

The owner of the jhum field does not have to pay the members of the community for their labour but would only have to provide them with food and drink for the voluntary services that they had provided. The tradition starts from the jhum-field's owner's house, and as the procession moves from the owner's house to the fields, the farmer marches, along with a white cloth around his neck that are specifically meant for this part of the custom and practice.

When the popularity of millet is important Prior to the Green Revolution, millet was a popular crop in different parts of Meghalaya. As a matter of fact, in the south of Jaintia where the hills slope towards the plain of Bangladesh, millet was the main crop. On the slopes where the terrain is not conducive for rice or wheat cultivation, millet is the only cereal that the people grow. I was the great revolution, which prioritised the production of rice and

wheat and, in the process, sidelined millet. Millet then became the 'ugly duckling' of the popular cereal in the region. A paper published claimed that before the green revolution, the production of rice and millet was much higher than the production of wheat, barley, and maize put together. The production of millet decreases a few decades after the green revolution was initiated, when priority was given to rice and wheat.

The neglected golden crop People may have neglected it now, but millet was part of people's food systems, particularly those who live on the southern slopes of the state and in the area along the borders with Assam. In the Jaintia hills, millet has not been popular with the people who live on the uplands because they have inherited rich wetland rice cultivation. For the people on the plateau of Jaintia hills, their culture revolves around rice. It is the people in the border regions of new Assam and Bangladesh, who are not familiar with wetland cultivation of rice, for whom millet is their mainstay. Unlike in the uplands, people in this region practise jhum cultivation, and millet is the main crop of the people in the region.

Reviving millet cultivation in Jaintia hills In Meghalaya, it was NESFAS that took the initiative to revive millet cultivation, and this sense was part of the agenda. In the year 2014, this writer, along with Pius Ramee of NESFAS, visited Moosakhilla village and enquired from members of the community if they happened to still have some stores related to millet. An elderly man in the village, Ma Loren Pakshang, said that he still had a "k'hoi" symbol, or a bamboo basket filled with seeds of rice and wheat, which need no much water, millet is the crop of the future. It also grows much faster than other cereals, as it grows in half the time of wheat, from this perspective too, millet is a much better candidate than other cereals. Millet is a tough crop that can also withstand extreme heat conditions, hence, it is sometimes called a "climate smart crop".

Meghalaya and millet Meghalaya, it seems, still lives in obscurity; the government has not been aware of the importance of this crop, which was once part of the history of the region and our culture. The government should act soon and engage with organizations which are working in promotion of the crop. The fact is that it will be a case of 'too little too late' by the time the government of Meghalaya wakes up from its stupor.

Yours etc, P. Kharwanlang, Shillong - 14

Where's the strong Opposition? Editor, UDP too have joined the NPP wagon. The question is why have they done that when they had enough numbers to beat the government. According to my understanding, a strong, vibrant, intellectual Opposition is the foundation of democracy and the BJP has got all the above criteria and perhaps more. With the UDP in the Opposition, I was hoping that we'll have a good and interesting time during the Assembly sessions. Alas! This is not to be for the UDP has tagged along with the NPP. Is it for fame, status, rank, power or prosperity? Or is this a strategic planning by the UDP from the beginning to reap what they had invested in the elections with huge interest and that too for another five years. While you enjoy let the state meet its doom.

Yours etc, Jennifer Dkhar, Via email

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

Artificial intelligence boom needs proper channelisation

No country today has sufficient data, plan, and compute capacity

By Dr Gyan Pathak

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming economics and promising new opportunities for productivity, growth, and resilience. Countries across the world are also responding with national AI strategies to capitalize on these transformations. However, no country today has sufficient data, plan, or a targeted plan for national AI compute capacity. This policy blind-spot may jeopardise domestic economic goals.

This is the gist of a recent OECD digital economy paper titled 'A Blueprint for Building National Compute Capacity for Artificial Intelligence.' This report has provided the first blueprint for policy makers to help assess and plan for the national AI compute capacity needed to enable productivity gains and capture AI's full economic potential.

It is worth noting that India is presently in the process of developing the National Artificial Intelligence Resource Portal under the aegis of the Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence. The platform will offer a web-based system to search and browse AI resources including training and a cloud-based compute platform. The other countries that have taken certain initiatives in the regard include Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Germany, Japan, Korea, Slovenia, Spain, UK, US, Serbia, Thailand, and Europe (to be shared with member countries). However, all initiatives are far less than the requirement.

This, despite the fact that Governments had committed themselves to the first intergovernmental standards on AI in the 2019 OECD Principles on Artificial Intelligence, "fostering the development of, and access to, a digital ecosystem for trustworthy AI" including underlying infrastructure such as AI compute. The progress in the part of the government, however, the world is obviously slower than the higher speed development in the field of AI.

Only few economies have "supercomputers" ranking as top computing systems, with emerging economies sparsely represented on the Top 500 list. The November 2022 Top 500 list shows 34 economies with a "top supercomputer". The highest concentration (32%) of top supercomputers is in the People's Republic of China, followed by the United States (25%), Germany (7%), Japan (6%), France (5%), and the United Kingdom (3%). The 17 countries on the list from the European Union (EU27) make up a combined 21% of top supercomputers. Beyond this group, the rest of the world makes up 12% of top supercomputers. Nearly 90% of top supercomputers were developed in the last five years. In recent years, super-computer systems have been increasingly updated to also run AI-specific workloads, although the list does not distinguish supercomputers according to workload capacity specialised for AI. However, the simple count of Top500 list does not reveal the full picture due to variation in number and capacity in performance.

After defining AI compute, the report takes stock of indicators, datasets, and proxies for measuring national AI compute capacity, and identifies obstacles for measuring and benchmarking national AI compute capacity across countries. Then it suggests AI compute plan along three dimensions — capacity, effectiveness, and resilience. Capacity covers availability and use of AI; effectiveness covers policy, innovation, and access; and resilience covers security, sovereignty, and sustainability.

However, embracing AI-enabled transformation depends on the availability of infrastructure and software to train and use AI models at scale. Ensuring countries have sufficient such "AI compute capacity" to meet their needs is critical to capturing AI's full economic potential.

Many countries have developed national AI strategies without fully assessing whether they have sufficient domestic AI compute infrastructure and software to realise their goals. Other AI enablers, like data, algorithms, and skills, receive significant attention in policy circles, but the hardware, software, and related infrastructure that make AI advances possible have received comparatively less attention.

Today, standardised measures of national AI compute capacity remain a policy gap. Such measures would give OECD and partner economies a greater understanding of AI compute and its relationship to the diffusion of AI, improve the implementation of AI strategies, and inform future policy and investments.

The demand for AI compute has grown dramatically for machine learning systems, especially deep learning and neural networks. According to research, the computational capabilities required to train modern machine learning systems, measured in number of mathematical operations per second, or FLOPS), has multiplied by hundreds of thousands of times since 2012, despite the development of, and access to, a digital ecosystem for trustworthy AI" including underlying infrastructure such as AI compute. The progress in the part of the government, however, the world is obviously slower than the higher speed development in the field of AI.

As governments invest in developing cutting-edge AI, compute divides can emerge or deepen. An imbalance of such compute resources risks reinforcing socio-economic divides, creating winners and losers in competitive advantage and productivity gains. Over the past decade, private sector led initiatives within countries have increasingly benefited from state-of-the-art AI compute resources, particularly from commercial cloud service providers, compared to public research institutes and academia. The OECD AI Expert Group on AI Compute and Climate advances collective understanding and measurement of AI compute to shed light on national AI ecosystems.

Findings and measurement gaps are identified by the report to inform future work in developing AI-specific metrics to quantify and benchmark AI compute capacity across countries. They include: national AI policy initiatives need to take AI compute capacity into account; national and regional data collection and measurement standards need to expand; policy makers need insights into the compute demands of AI systems; AI-specific measurements should be differentiated from general-purpose compute; workers need access to AI compute related skills and training for effective AI compute use; and AI compute supply chains and inputs need to be mapped and analysed. (IPI Service)

What's the real mandate for 2023?

Editor, Let's introspect with maturity of thought on Gregory F. Shull's 'The Great Anti-Christian Rhetoric' (ST, 7th March, 2023) write-up. Strangely, I too have wondered how political parties so readily and hastily banded together! All the filthy mouthing, shameful accusations and disgusting finger pointing have all come to an abrupt end under a convenient but false bonhomie! Will I be politically correct to assume all parties that have joined the coalition are clandestinely BJP hankers supporters now? And so I'm in agreement when he states, "that in essence sums up the character of the electorate, the elected and the elections."

Expediency makes the elected sit in the same boat as the ones they declared as anti-Christian...

Now the new government must prove itself worthy and honour all the promises made to the people in the spirit of sacrifice that he mentions. Let the State roll on in all areas of social development!

Yours etc, Kevin Phillips, Shillong - 19

Meghalaya Govt formation

Editor, In the recent elections to the Meghalaya Assembly some have succumbed and vice versa. Its good to see new faces springing up. Be it money power, people's power or otherwise the die is cast. About the fractured mandate, some are happy,

"Reality is the leading cause of stress among those in touch with it."

— Lily Tomlin

The Shillong Times

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Personalised politics

WORTHY causes are often defeated by personal ambitions. The Telangana chief minister's daughter K Kavitha has announced a day-long hunger strike at Jantar Mantar on Friday, seeking passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament. Clearly, this activism dawned on her at a time when she received a summons from the Enforcement Directorate for questioning in the Delhi Liquor Scam. Delhi's deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia is already under arrest and is being grilled by the central investigation agency. The shadow of the case has reached up to Kavitha, a former MP from Telangana and currently an MLC in the state legislative council. Perceptions are that Kavitha would be the next to be arrested, while a go-between in the alleged payment bribe to the AAP for alleged tweaking of the capital state's new liquor policy too had been arrested.

The Enforcement Directorate can be accused of doing the bidding of the government in power at the Centre. It could, to an extent, be His Master's Voice. But, it would be illogical to assume or argue that ED or CB would target innocents. There can be no smoke without a fire. Investigations are all about hard facts, not whimsical conclusions. Investigations will lead to presentation of facts before courts, which will consider these and punish the guilty. The details of the Delhi scam would be known once the case moves court. It is premature now to pronounce either Sisodia or Kavitha innocent despite their high social status.

Women have not got due representation in government jobs though their number in various departments is steadily increasing. When every 'backward' segment of the population is given reservations to ensure a just treatment to them, the parliamentary push for 33 per cent reservation to women too is justified. Political establishments must act in unison to make this a reality. The sooner this is done, the better. But, the present obsession of the IBS leader from Telangana to push this case must be seen principally as an attempt at her worst time to save her skin -- from the impending ED offensive against her. Her family, a bunch of them, is being ruled Telangana since 2014, after it gained statehood and got separated from Andhra Pradesh. Kavitha's father meanwhile transformed his regional TRS party into Bharat Rashtra Samithi for a national outreach and to fan his ambition of leading the nation. Kavitha must be gracious enough to face the ED grilling and come out clean -- and she is well within her limits to push all cases dear to her heart. The strange mix of personal and political interests must be avoided at all costs.

Analysing the Congress Party and its revival prospects

By Patricia Mukhim

At no time in Meghalaya's political history has the Congress done so badly as in the 2023 Assembly polls where it got just 5 seats. The Congress is one of the oldest national parties in these hills. In the first State Assembly polls in 1972, the Congress got 9 seats while APHLC got 12 seats. In 1978 the Congress scored 20 seats while APHLC got 16 and the HSPDP 14. In 1983 the Congress shot up to 25 seats while the APHLC and HSPDP got 15 seats each. In 1988 the Congress jumped to 22 seats. By then the APHLC had become IPU and got 19 seats while the HSPDP got 19 seats and the HSPDP got 6 while 9 Independents emerged as Kingmakers. In 1993 the Congress got a further boost with 24 seats, the IPU-11 and HSPDP-8 and Independents-10.

Come 1998, the Congress got 25 seats and the IPU which had by then become BJP got 20 seats while HSPDP got 3 seats only. That was the first time that the BJP got 3 seats in Meghalaya and there were 10 Independents. In 2003 the Congress got 22 seats, NCP 14 seats, UDP 9, KINAM entered the fray for the first time and got 2 seats while 5 Independents won. In 2008 the Congress again went up to 25, NCP 15, UDP-11, HSPDP-2 and Independents-5. In 2013 the Congress jumped up to 29, NCP got 2, IPU-8, HSPDP-4, Independents-13. In 2018 Congress got 21, NPP-20, UDP-6, HSPDP-2, NCP-1. In 2023 the Congress is reduced to 5 seats only while NPP jumped up to 26 and the IPU got 11 while HSPDP got only 2. Readers will forgive me for not knowing how to make graphs that could make the figures tell their own story.

Be that as it may this article is about the depths that the Congress Party had plunged into over the years. Today it is just a shadow of its former self. Considering that the Congress is the only party apart from the BJP which has a national presence, its diminishing presence from a state like Nagaland where it secured zero this time should perhaps make the people of this country tell the Congress to pull up its socks and get real. Since the dynasty is

deviant activity that is going on in the city with respect to the delivery of online items. One needs to take certain precautions while one discards off the packet that comes along with the stuff that is bought online. The receipt attached to the packet has to be destroyed before the packet is trashed. Leaving it intact is not safe. Fraudsters have now found a way to cheat customers. They pick the receipt as well as the packets from the trash. Next, they use the packet, put some old item, seal it neatly, attach the receipt slip in the packet and then it is sent out for a cash on delivery basis. Apparently, this ploy to dupe the customers can only be successfully carried out when the delivery agent is also in collusion. I was in my car in a friend's house in March 7, 2023, perpetrated by a delivery boy who normally delivers stuff from Amazon. The Amazon agent had brought two items with him, one was a packet that is listed with Amazon and another that is unlisted. Forer listed packet, I was asked to pay Rs. 1999. Trusting that when I opened the packet, it contained an old and tattered dress. Since the delivery

boy was within earshot, I called him back to return the delivery of an online item, explaining that he had already returned a message on his phone that the item was delivered. He neither took back the packet nor did he return my money. Realising that I still had one more option to recover my money, I began scolding the barcode on the receipt to reach out to the company in order to make a complaint, but to my dismay, the scanned result showed a random number. It then dawned on me that I had been duped.

In this instance, I must admit that I had been a little careless. Had I checked my phone for the delivery details, I would not have landed in such a tight spot. Normally, online stores send alerts on the delivery status of items ordered. Today, I overlooked all that and ended up being the loser.

Aiom Phymai Shabang, Via email

Farewell to the man with a mission

Editor, Through your esteemed daily I would like to share my grief and sorrow with the members of the bereaved family of (L) Hal All Scot Lyngdoh. With a heavy heart I learnt about the demise of Hal Aubrey with whom I

had a very cordial relation. I was associated with him during the Shillong Communist Party establishment in 1975. For the first time tableau of different communities irrespective of caste, creed and religion participated in the tableau movement right from the Shillong Club premises and culminating at the State Central Library travelling hand in hand. I was a member of the Shillong Communist Party and I was very grateful to him, who helped them with all he could within his capacity and to their satisfaction. Once again I offer my condolences to one and all associated with his family. I would like to quote Shakespeare's beautiful words from "Hamlet": "Good night Sweet Prince May the light of Angels take thee to eternal rest". Yours etc, S L Singhania, Via email

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

Mawlai electorate exhibits the true spirit of democracy

By Aristotle Lyngdoh

"Democracy is when the Indigent and the mean of property, are the rulers." -Aristotle. Greek Philosopher One of the key features of democracy is when people have the right to vote and the power to change those at the helm of public affairs. And this is what the people of Mawlai have collectively done. The phenomenon that the apple fell from the tree had deeply perplexed Isaac Newton and led to the formulation of gravitational theory that pulls falling objects straight towards the centre of the earth. Similarly, the gravity for want of change in the 15-Mawlai (ST) constituency has pulled down the two most popular politicians of the constituency Teibor Pathwa (Sitting MDC) and PT Sawmik (Sitting MLA) from the coveted position as MLA. In fact both of them had very high hopes of winning the seat from one another because of the developmental work they have undertaken in the past five years as MDC and MLA of this constituency.

The unexpected landslide victory of the VPP candidate has left other contestants and many of us baffled and shocked as to how on earth could this happen. But for the winning VPP candidate, Brightstar Marbhang, I think it's a miracle where he himself could not ponder how the waves went in his favour. Marbhang's vic-

"The unexpected landslide victory of the VPP candidate has left other contestants and many of us baffled and shocked as to how on earth could this happen. But for the winning VPP candidate, Brightstar Marbhang, I think it's a miracle where he himself could not ponder how the waves went in his favour."

tor is despite the fact constraints to organize rallies and frequent public meetings and campaigns involving considerable amounts of money, let alone the feasting and partying in a candidate's residence. Also there were rare public speeches and appearances unlike other candidates. Still the voters resonated with the slogan 'Ha U'Prab' in every nook and corner of Mawlai. The sudden change of wave, days before the voting day seemed to have been inspired by someone, whose voters both young and old, poor and rich, educated and uneducated shared the same inner voice and that is the need for a change. Looking at the vote shares by all the candidates of this constituency, Marbhang secured 24,262 votes, which is 60 percent of the total valid votes polled, thereby leaving other contestants to lose their security deposits other than the NPP candidate. This is indeed a historical feat that saw overwhelming support for a lesser known and unpopular young entrant into politics is nothing but an act of God. Here I can say that for the first time people of Mawlai voted rationally for the party VPP which stands for clean politics, integrity of the candidates. But had the VPP fielded any Tom, Dick and Harry just for the sake of fielding candidates, the outcome would have been disastrous.

Let us forget some years ago Mawlai was tagged as a slum locality for the fact that this part of Shillong city has sheltered many underprivileged families, the uneducated, the poor and the needy as well. But yet they resented money, bribes and other kinds of attentions. And if one is a keen observer and reads the voting patterns or follows the trends, it clearly shows that money, power and election emotions have totally failed to overpower the will of the people when they rationally yearn for a change. This is an exemplary model that the people of Mawlai constituency have adopted. It also resembled the 1977 Lok Sabha elections when

their voices when they have forfeited their voting rights to the candidate who bought them. But for the Mawlai voters, this is not so. The mood of contentment prevails in the constituency because people have bought their part. And what remains is the accountability and transparency of the elected member to do justice to the mandate that has been entrusted to him as a legislator. Therefore, the MLA or MDC report card on various schemes being implemented, will not be the criteria to retain the seat in future, unless they perform well as legislators. And this is the spirit in which people have voted with good conscience and sound understanding. Moreover, if this trend continues, I firmly believe that a revolution of change will happen where money power is not the sole factor for contesting and winning elections. A high time that citizens across the state and country should come together irrespective of religions, caste, tribe and language to vote for development and upliftment of the people and society. Mawlai voters have clearly led the way in this regard to prove to the world what it means to say 'by the people, for the people'. This shows that democracy belongs to the people and they are the ones who should take the final call as to who should be elected, re-elected and rejected for legislative autonomy. In the era of fractured electoral mandate in this Hills State, the ray of hope and silver lining lies only in the unity and cohesiveness of the people who alone can change the corrupt practices of our political system and that has begun from some at the constituency level. Mawlai electors understand clearly that development of Mawlai constituency alone is insufficient if the whole state is lagging behind in every area of life, be it education, health, agriculture, etc. The only way forward is to elect a government that can address the needs of the learned legislators that each constituency can produce.

Fighting corruption-A losing battle

Editor, I read with interest and listened with concern to the words of all walks of life ranting on corruption free politics. Who does not want a clean and transparent government? But the question is, will we ever get such a government? Here what I see is a battle of ideology against pragmatism. To speak of a corruption free government anywhere in the world and much more in India, is to engage oneself in a futile exercise. To think of clean politics in any society is like looking for a green elephant in the jungle. As the bible tells us, we human beings are tainted by sin and we are perpetually under the influence of sin. The epistle to the Romans says "no one is righteous, no not one" (Rom 3:10). Thus corruption, greed, jealousy, name any vice you know, are only the manifestations of our human frailty and sin-prone nature.

Comeing back to politics, I have witnessed a lot of good, righteous and ethical persons, who entered politics with a good intention of being "different from others", yet finally most of them ended up being "worse than others". Frankly speaking I feel nauseated to hear people speaking endlessly of clean

NPP's dismal show in Khasi-Jaintia Hills

Editor, The recent results of the 11th Meghalaya State election on March 2, have self-evidently demonstrated that in the entire part of the State inhabited by the Hyndicetribes which constitute 36 seats of the total 60 allotted seats, the NPP could capture only 8 seats, 4 seats apiece from Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills respectively. Converting to mathematical calculations it transpires that NPP has hardly won a 25% of Assembly seats assigned to this part of the State. Perhaps such a beggarly percentage bugged by the NPP has unleashed emotional disillusionment among the Hyndicetribes people as demonstrated at massive public rallies. Some have opined that consequential outcome post election results ought not be made light of or played down in times to come. Yours etc, Jerome K Dzingdoh, Shillong-2.

Online shoppers beware

Editor, Through your esteemed paper I would like to apprise the online shoppers about a

Fighting corruption-A losing battle

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*"The aim of the wise is not to secure pleasure, but to avoid pain."*  
— Aristotle

**The Shillong Times**

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**Another test for the Opposition**  
NEWLY elected Speaker Thomas Sangma has said he will have to consult legal and constitutional experts to determine who to appoint as Leader of the Opposition in the 59 member Assembly. The Speaker says that a political party should get at least one-sixth of the seats in the House to qualify to be Leader of the Opposition. In the case of Meghalaya today, the Congress and TMC both have five MLAs each which individually adds up to one-twelfth of the total strength in the House. The VPP with 4 members has even less. The only way out of the predicament is for the three Opposition Parties to come together and decide who will lead the Opposition.

An Assembly without a clear Leader of the Opposition (LoP) will fail to represent the voices of the people and will also fail to keep a check on the government. The LoP is a shadow Chief Minister and his presence is critical in order to strengthen the democratic process. The absence of the LoP will mean that the Opposition will not be able to present a united front in opposing the policies of the ruling party which could at times be anti-people. It has been witnessed that in the Lok Sabha the presence of the LoP is a great check to the bulldozing tactics of the ruling party especially in these times. It is incumbent for the state assemblies too to counter the brute power of the ruling party/parties.

The LoP has an important role also because he/she can offer the administration a constructive critique on many issues. In the last House, Dr Mukul Saagma and his team of MLAs played a sterling role in pointing out the acts of omission and commission of the MDA Government and perhaps kept it in check to some extent. Constructive critiques especially from senior and experienced legislators also helps the government in policy and legislative actions. The LoP can also offer a different perspective that can help the government engage in alternative views other than do not violate legislative norms. The LoP has a huge responsibility in also ensuring that Assembly committees are adequately represented and to ensure that the rights of minorities in any state are not violated. The LoP can demand that a session be called for debates when the government evades legislative scrutiny. He/she is also important in ensuring impartiality and bipartisanship in the nominations made to institutions that promote accountability and openness. It is a sad commentary that Meghalaya has been reduced to a situation where no single political party has reached the one-sixth mark needed to occupy this important position.

# BJP and the Christian vote

By Rajdeep Sardesai

In a distant corner of the country, a "new" BJP is attempting to break through an 'old' barrier. At a Sunday mass in one of Shillong's oldest churches, union ministry affairs minister John Barla is among the prominent attendees. His presence is meant to reassure the citizenry of a Christian-dominated state going to the polls that the BJP is not anti-Christian. With 75 of its 80 candidates across Meghalaya and Nagaland from the Christian community, the BJP is hoping to showcase itself as a party which is now far more embracing of a religious faith with whom the Sangh Parivar has traditionally had an uneasy relationship with.

The BJP might well argue that it has been in power in Goa for over a decade now, another state with a substantial Christian population. In Meghalaya and Nagaland, it has been a coalition partner in government for the last five years. The BJP's ties with regional parties in Meghalaya and Nagaland, both governments headed by Christian chief ministers, are designed to send out a message of being a more inclusive political force. But power-sharing agreements through opportunistic post-poll deals is not quite the same as winning the hearts and minds of a community that remains suspicious of Hinduva politics.

When last month, a church in Chhatisgarh was vandalized by a Hinduva vigilante group, Meghalaya's Christian organisations raised a red flag, calling on prime minister Modi to break his silence on what they called 'the increased targeting of the Christian community'. When an octogenarian Jesuit priest, Father Stan Swamy was arrested under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, and eventually died in hospital after complaints of ill-treatment, there was an angry reaction from church bodies. When the Kamata assembly passed an anti-conversion bill, there was condemnation from community leaders. Indeed, from anti-conversion laws in BJP-

hardline Hinduva in the heartland states but he more willing to adjust to local sensitivities in the periphery of the country where sheer demographics demand greater flexibility. The AIMIM MP Asaduddin Ovaisi may well claim to have exposed the underlying hypocrisy in the BJP's agenda by remarking that "Beeef is rummy for the BJP in UP but is yummy in Goa and the south east" but the dichotomy also reflects a pragmatic attitude in dealing with a diverse society with varied food habits. Where a BJP in a previous avatar may well have been more rigid in sticking to its one ideological value, the "new" BJP is willing to compromise for political benefit.

In his defining book, 'Bunch of Thoughts', long serving RSS sangechhalaik, MS Golwalkar had marked Muslims, Christians, and Communists as the three major internal threats to the country. "Such is the role of Christian gentlemen residing in our land today, out to demolish not only the religious and social fabric of our life but also to establish political domination in various pockets and if possible all over the land." The "new" BJP has attempted to distance itself from Golwalkar's views in public — even if his portrait

consciously projected its Catholic MLAs.

Thirdly, there is a realization that any targeting of Christians will invite a global backlash from the western world. Recall how in 2015, former US president Barack Obama had spoken of acts of religious intolerance in India which would have shocked Mahatma Gandhi. Recall also how prime minister Modi in 2021 made it a point to hug and invite Pope Francis to India, almost as if recognizing the need for creating the right optics with the global head of the Catholic church.

Finally, there is prime minister Modi's over-arching ambition to be recognized as a genuine pan-Indian leader whose appeal is not confined to the Hindi heartland or the Hindu voter. The north-east push of the Modi government is a crucial element

in this exercise. When the prime minister for example is spotted in Khasi head-gear in Meghalaya, he is seeking to identify himself with the local customs. When he appeals for votes in the name of a 'sabka saath, sabka vikas' credo in Nagaland, he is seeking to be judged on the basis of a non-discriminatory development scheme framework.

It is unclear just how successful the BJP's wooing of Christian voters will be: just the day before Barla was elected Sunday mass, the Fr. Ansool Congreg's Deck O'Brien was also holding closed door parleys with church representatives as well as a local congress leader. The fight for the Christian vote has only just begun.

Post-script: While the sangh parivar has often targeted Christian missionary leaders and accused them of religious conversion in the garb of education, what is often conveniently forgotten is that a long list of BJP leaders — doing all the BJP leadership in Gujarat, almost as if the community remains a political 'unouchable'. The BJP's interaction with Syrian Christian Bishops in Kerala is just as noteworthy: the attempt is to find common ground by preying on Islamophobia and shared anxieties over 'love jihad', a term used to stoke fears of religious conversion through marriage. In Goa too, the BJP, especially under late chief minister Manohar Parikar,

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# Organisational churning within political parties

By Philip Marwein

The news item "Organisational churning in BJP, Congress 14cyl" (ST March 6, 2023) is interesting as it revealed the truth. Yes, the BJP has been in Meghalaya for over 32 years. This is a long period and if the party cannot grow in strength in terms of having many MLAs, then there must be some fundamental reasons that this most popular widely accepted ruling party of India cannot expand and grow here. In Meghalaya the name of this party is widely known in every nook and corner through the media but there are no leaders and workers working and engaging with the masses in the Districts and Mandals (Blocks), not to mention in different hamlets and villages. Yes, there are leaders but only in the state capital and in one or two districts but where are the grassroots leaders and workers? Leaders and workers

Where are the good works done by the state BJP leaders seen on the ground? None at all. If the leaders are there in the office only to expect funds coming from Delhi and to share it among themselves and no tangible results on the grounds then it will never grow even if elections come in 2028, 2033 and 2038. Yes, heads in the Meghalaya BJP State Mandals have to roll if the party has to play a major partner in ruling the state in the near future.

should come from amongst the masses who live and die with them. When elections are due, there's a hectic search for candidates overnight and randomly in all 60 constituencies. What's this foolish action by the state leaders including the BJP leader in the charge of Meghalaya? The most prudent and correct step is to set up viable candidates only in those few constituencies where there are grassroots leaders and workers who have been working and engaging among the masses for a considerable period of time. What were the state BJP leaders doing all these years? The number of MLAs remained static at just two whereas there were at least six or seven promising constituencies from where the party should have won with thumping margins during the last elections considering the effort and investments that the party High Command had invested.

Coming to the Trinamool Congress I can say that it has done quite well by securing five seats in a poll of six-yearly. It is being a new entrant in the state to reach out to the electorate of Meghalaya is not easy because voters here are hesitant to vote for a new party. The TMC has an arduous journey ahead to make itself politically relevant and to give the party High Command a good start in the near future. It should handle it of course, but

"Even winning the next Lok Sabha seat in 2024 is in serious doubt because the political equations and dynamics have now changed in many Assembly segments. Is the vote bank of the Congress intact or has it been reduced in 2023? Certainly, it has. Having said that, the Congress also required immediate shake up of leadership in a number of Blocks which have witnessed mass exodus of its top leaders to NPP and other parties."

henceforth is for the state party leaders to work hard and ceaselessly with proper planning and strategies. Where are the good works done by the state BJP leaders seen on the ground? None at all. If the leaders are there in the office only to expect funds coming from Delhi and to share it among themselves and no tangible results on the grounds then it will never grow even if elections come in 2028, 2033 and 2038. Yes, heads in the Meghalaya BJP State Mandals have to roll if the party has to play a major partner in ruling the state in the near future. For how long will it have to wait, even though it has long term plans for the future? I am cynical about its positive outcome in the foreseeable future. For this the state Mandals has to do a lot of introspection and disorganise to fix the ommissions-commissions.

As for the Congress it already has its Organisational set up and vote bank built over the years but it is in serious crisis in its state leadership. It just needs a capable and dynamic leader to lead from the front as Vincent Pala has failed to win even from his own turf and far from attaining state leadership stature. Even winning the next Lok Sabha seat in 2024 is in serious doubt because the political equations and dynamics have now changed in many Assembly segments. It will slowly be sapped of its vibrancy, vitality and relevance by the NPP in any case NPP does not need the BJP. It is the other round. UDDP has no bargaining power in the new dispensation unlike during 2018-2022. At the end of this term it will find itself on dry ground without water unless it can manage to wriggle out of its present predicament.

As for VPP its future prospects will be very bright provided it can play its cards well and perform its role effectively and splendidly. It all depends on its think tank.

Letters to the Editor

## Avoidable road accidents

Editor, With the ever increasing number of vehicles on the road, accidents are commonplace nowadays. Vehicles are getting technologically advanced and reliable these days and road accidents due to mechanical failure are rare if maintained properly. The same is true for road design and road accidents due to mechanical failure are rare if maintained properly. This also implies that the onus lies with the motorists in preventing the vast majority of these accidents. Judgmental errors, rash driving or driver fatigues are some of the major components that can be termed as human errors and are preventable to a great extent.

Very recently I met with an accident the outcome of which could have been very nasty. I had a hectic schedule a couple of days before and did not have sufficient rest. While returning to Shillong from my hometown in Assam, I dozed off at the wheel and within a fleeting moment I hit a parked vehicle and

veered off towards a gorge. Fortunately, the stationary vehicle acted to reduce the momentum of my car and a concrete pillar and some bushes helped to prevent any roll over. Both the cars were seriously damaged but miraculously none of us in the vehicle were hurt. I was shocked at the sudden turn of events, but was immediately reassured by the comforting nature of the locals gathered there. This is very important for those involved in accidents, especially for the injured. Small gestures of sympathy and help can go a long way in recovering from the sudden trauma. I called the police help and soon a traffic police vehicle arrived to take charge of the situation. The cars were towed back to the police station at Mawli and official formalities started.

In these pages of this newspaper I criticised the professionalism of Shillong Traffic Police in managing the chaotic traffic of Shillong city. I reiterate again the professionalism of the traffic personnel involved in my case and the help they have rendered during that nightmare. Now, coming to the point whether such mishaps can be prevented, my feeling is that situations like this are entirely preventable with a little effort and consciousness on the part of the motorists. If a driver is feel-

ing tired while driving, he should pull off the road and rest for a while. Put sometimes, we tend to ignore this in the never-ending race of life as happened to me which could potentially result in serious consequences. In advanced countries, the driver has to mandatorily rest for some time after driving for a certain period of time. This helps to reduce driver's fatigue and judgmental errors. It is not an hour of rest worth investing in than potentially risking physical and mental trauma, not to mention huge financial implications?

I will never sit behind the wheels when tired or feel like dozing off. I learn the lesson of any life the hard way.

Yours etc.,  
Dr Utkam Saikia,  
Zoological Survey of India,  
Shillong  
Via email

## Wanted complete polling data

Editor, The news report in The Shillong Times of March 9, 2023 regarding the data of votes polled by different major parties in the just concluded assembly elections in Meghalaya is informative and interesting. Could you please try to complete the

picture and provide us the data concerning the other parties' groups who have fielded contestants. The data would be very useful for many.

Yours etc.,  
River Wallang,  
Via email

## Democracy in Meghalaya

Editor, Events transpiring in the last few days are not new when you have a plethora of wannabe filmmakers. At once I thought of some scenes from Ganga of Wassepur. Social media in Meghalaya has been purring will rant on the UDDP-HISPPJ and PDP for their support to MDA 2.0 and the subsequent meetings to find their lost sheep. The electorate had a chance to reverse their fortunes on February 27 but they have not chosen to do so. Hence blaming their Shahenshahi (political masters) is just adding fuel to the fire. At the end of the political spectrum, BJP's pointman Amit Shah has leveraged his game for the 2024 elections. A friend once told me that the fire of Meghalaya lies in the hands of the rural masses and the lofty promises and warped manifestos will never see the light of day. The problem is

in trusting the wrong people, but it is the right time to take ownership of our problems and move to a new tomorrow. In the book 'The Case of the Bonasi Manager' by R.Gopalakrishnan, it is clear that no much power will bring forth folly.

Yours etc.,  
Christopher Capiboh,  
Shillong-10

## Inflation a big worry

Editor, I read and watch a lot about countries whose imports are way more than what they export. Such countries ultimately take huge loans to get their economy running and pay an equally huge amount of interest on those loans. Then they take more loans just to pay the interests. Of course corruption also plays a big role in adding to the economy's suffering. Meghalaya today is setting the same example as such countries with very less export and very high imports, especially at a phase when everything is expensive, from fuel to house rent to electricity and almost everything needed for day today living. Earlier there was a time when Meghalaya relied on coal, timber and tourism. Expenses were lesser and so people did spend but



BJP leaders in Meghalaya. Photo: [Source]

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

# Yes, #OscarsSoWhite – but there are still plenty of reasons to celebrate contemporary Black film

By Timika N. Tounsel

When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced the nominees for its 95th Oscars and three of the most celebrated films of the season – *The Woman King*, *Till* and *Saint Omer* – received no nominations, a familiar refrain of frustration rang forth.

These films demonstrated typical dramatic and technical markers that tend to predict cinematic success – positive reviews, scripts inspired by true stories and adherence to dramatic formulas. So it was natural to wonder whether the fact that each featured a Black female director and Black female cast may have had something to do with the snubs.

Awards are certainly about more than pomp and circumstance. Gina Prince-Bythewood, who directed *The Woman King*, issued a heartfelt reflection on the significance of the Academy Awards for filmmakers from underrepresented groups.

They matter, Prince-Bythewood wrote, because directors can leverage those nominations and wins to make more films with larger budgets – the kinds of movies that only those with Oscars on their resumes will be in the running to direct.

As someone who studies, teaches and writes about Black popular culture, I understand how industry dynamics subject Black productions to greater scrutiny. Against this backdrop of skepticism, filmmakers have established a Black cinematic tradition that's less anxious about capitulating to a system that has long marginalized Black stories.

So what other metrics, beyond recognition from the Academy, might be considered when gauging the state of Black cinema?

For me, two films from 2022 – *Master* and *Hank For Jesus*, *Save Your Soul* – demonstrate just how far filmmakers have progressed in redefining Blackness on the silver screen. They dig deep into the interior lives of a spectrum of Black characters, showcasing the ways in which filmmakers are pushing back against mainstream representations of Black womanhood.

## A history of exclusion and controversy

The academy's troubled relationship with Black filmmakers is as old as the association itself. After the inaugural banquet was held in 1929, it took 11 years for the first African American, Hattie McDaniel, to go home with an Oscar.

She won for her portrayal as Mammy in *Gone With The Wind*, but her Black years didn't uniformly celebrate her historic win. Mammy was a two-dimensional caricature based on the premise of Black subservience, so some of them saw McDaniel as contribu-



tion today among Black women professors.

Drawn from the Senegalese-American writer and director's own experience of negotiating such an institution as a student, the film departs from the typical storytelling formula that suggests that Black people who get into college or are hired as faculty have "made it." Instead, viewers gain access to the various terrors – often ignored by all except those subject to them – that lurk in every classroom, frat party and faculty meeting.

Hall's *Gail* shatters the myth that those positioned higher on an university organizational chart are better shielded from racial trauma than their students.

## Showing Black women's struggles

In *Hank For Jesus*, *Save Your Soul*, the debut feature film for sisters Adamma and Adanne Ebo, Hall offers yet another stereotype-defying portrayal as Trinitie Childs, the wife and professional partner of a disgraced megachurch pastor. Having offered financial settlements in exchange for his accusers' silence, the film chronicles Pastor Childs' attempt to redeem himself from a sexual misconduct scandal that led most of his congregants to leave the church.

Like many "first ladies" – the term commonly used to describe the leadership role of pastors' wives in Protestant denominations – Trinitie has invested years of her own administrative talents into a ministry tethered to her husband's image. For this reason, she's reluctant to relinquish their position – and the affluent lifestyle it affords them – even in light of her husband's transgressions.

*Hank For Jesus* complicates the image of respectable Black Christian womanhood, not by releasing Childs from the shackles of this standard, but by revealing the elaborate ruminations and compromises required to maintain it.

Yet the film contains translatable truths about the psychic burden of adhering to any sort of ideal. You don't have to be the wife of a pastor to see, in Trinitie's plight, the burdens of being a "good wife" or a "respectable Black citizen."

In Hall's portrayal of Childs, I see a thread to her previous, marriage-obsessed characters. Becoming a wife may be the end of one obstacle course, but it's the beginning of another.

These two films might not headline the awards season, but they nonetheless attest to how Black filmmakers are continuing to produce their stories even without traditional Hollywood backing. (*The author is an Assistant Professor of Black Studies in Communication*)

ing to the denigration of Black people on screen.

Oscar controversy continued into the 21st century. While the 2002 Oscar wins of Halle Berry and Denzel Washington signaled an acknowledgment of Black artistry in film after decades of dismissals, some critics pointed out that they won for roles that reflected degrading stereotypes of Black people.

Given this history of exclusion and degradation, Black filmmakers and institutions have long forged separate infrastructures for producing, distributing and honoring Black cinematic art. I have written elsewhere about how storyteller-entrepreneurs such as Oscar Micheaux and Eloyee Gist established a filmmaking tradition that skirted the commercial, often racist – logic that can govern Hollywood decision making.

Their desire to tell stories in a way that resonated with Black audiences compelled them to avoid mainstream industry gatekeepers. In *Within Our Gates* (1920), for example, Micheaux directly challenges racist stereotypes ad-

vanced in the infamous *Birth of a Nation* (1915).

Gist, who collaborated with her husband James, made films featuring explicit spiritual themes, such as *Hellbound Train* (1930).

Both filmmakers envisioned an African American audience for their work and took the mission of racial uplift seriously.

## Progress beyond Hollywood benchmarks

While contemporary scholarship celebrates their legacy, Hollywood never embraced filmmakers like Gist and Micheaux. The racial hierarchy that determined whose stories made it to the big screen in the 1920s has mostly persisted over the past century.

However, over the past 12 years, streaming and web-based platforms have allowed today's Black filmmakers to write new kinds of characters into being – and have liberated them from both traditional gatekeepers and the pressure of appealing to the masses.

As I explain in my study on Black women's representations in popular culture, a new genera-

tion of storytellers have benefited from the efforts of media companies to stand out by targeting typically underrepresented audiences.

These filmmakers have found homes for their films on streaming services such as Amazon Prime and Peacock. These platforms afford them the opportunity to reach smaller niches without large production and promotion budgets.

## Blackness on screen

In addition to showcasing lesser-known talents, a number of independent Black films released over the last year have also expanded the types of stories that get told about Black life and the types of characters that Black actors get to play.

Two, in particular, stood out to me.

In *Master* and *Hank For Jesus*, *Save Your Soul*, actress Regina Hall assumes roles that allow her to move beyond the archetypes that have defined her career.

In Mariama Diallo's *Master*, Hall stars as Gail Bishop, a tenured professor who is the first

Black "master," or head of a residential college, at a prestigious university in the Northeast. Audiences first encountered Hall in the 1999 film *The Best Man*, in which she plays a young woman paying her way through college as an exotic dancer.

In the years that followed, she starred in a number of Black romance films, a subgenre that surged in popularity in the late-20th and early-21st centuries. Many of these films reflected and reinforced an interracial anxiety about declining marriage rates among African American women. The Black women characters that existed in these films, such as Hall's starring role in *Think Like a Man* (2012), fetishized the characters tended to design their lives in pursuit of it.

However, in *Master*, Hall is catapulted away from the sunlit-filled spaces of romantic comedy and into the haunted corridors of a predominantly white university. Even Hall's usually straight tresses have been exchanged for short, tightly coiled curls, reflecting an aesthetic com-

# Hold your own amid chaos & conflict

By Jyotsna Ahuja

Humans know one thing from the day they become aware of being in their bodies. And that one definitive thing is that life is constant change. When you look at this from any angle, we as humans are always aware that there is something that we don't know, or cannot foresee. The whole concept of being human is to experience ourselves as our lives unfold.

As a result of this phenomenon, humans must always 'budget' or account for unforeseen or unpredictable events. We say "who knows what tomorrow will bring" when we plan for our future and other wishes, goals and aspirations. We also say, "life is what happens while you are making other plans."

Thus, all humans have always planned for the future, based on the extent of that which they have experienced as a structure, or what's called the familiarity of experience.

As we grow older, we gradually become more capable of dealing with unknown territory, and so our confidence increases. But what few humans notice is, that they too tend to become set in their ways. And so, life becomes a constant. But only for some time. Then something happens, and you find yourself needing to adapt to a new circumstance and so change happens. The more easily you allow yourself to adapt to this change, the easier life becomes. The harder we hold on to the older comfort zones of our lives, the more stuck we also feel in our ways.

Life is meant to be kind. It helps you grow when you get entangled with outdated modes of perception or limiting patterns of both beliefs and behaviour, by gently bringing about a change in circumstances. This is when for example events unexpectedly unfold differently than you expected. To some, this might appear a bit frightening, disturbing, annoying, or simply frustrating.

Someone else may feel totally overwhelmed by the smallest disruption in the schedule. The way we react to change defines it as either an opportunity for growth or chaos which makes us react as if we are in conflict with the change itself.

Left unchecked at this stage, this behaviour becomes a pattern of

responding negatively to changes in circumstances, and we develop a deep imprint in our brain – what neuroscience calls NLP or behavioural structuring. We easily then get used to responding with great anger or despair at any change in what we expect life to be like.

Life, however, does not allow for stagnancy for anyone, anywhere.

Your ability to move with the flow of life defines whether you can remain centred in the midst of any storm, literally or figuratively. Just like 'life is a constant change' is a paradox, yet it is a law of nature, similarly, 'flow, so that you remain in equilibrium' is an internal law of nature that is a guarantee to be equanimous or have inner peace and calm. Just like maintaining your breath rhythm while running, this is maintaining balance with whatever experiences life brings your way.

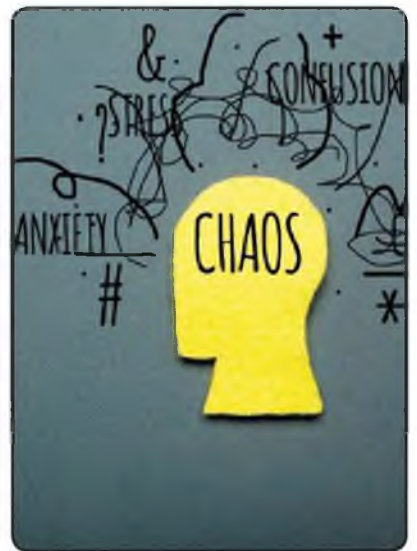
In that, the chaos is not conflicting but shows you how life itself is your best friend. This is one of the greatest secrets to being heart-conscious or experiencing true happiness.

At The White Space and its soon-to-be-launched School of Love, Wisdom & Healing also called The Four Horsemen or Vajraha Consciousness (TFH-VC), we hear the words that humans don't say, and turn it into a greater awareness of their purpose in this lifetime. When they can make sense of the experiences that they have had in the past, as well as the present, they can better understand how to adapt to their own future.

A greater love for yourself ensues therefrom. This is also called agape consciousness or the greatest extent of self-worth, self-love, and self-awareness as being love itself as a human, in the image of divinity. TWS & its school TFH-VC, teach many people the ability to be heart-conscious lovers. We conduct workshops & seminars towards agape or heart consciousness, with the hope and aspiration to create communities of heart conscious living everywhere in the world.

Stay happy. Stay healed. Stay kind to yourself above all. You are always beloved.

(Jyotsna Ahuja, is the founder and personal transformation coach of The White Space,



# WPL: A sparkling start to women's franchise cricket

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) should be complimented in organising the Women's Premier League. It was inaugurated by some dance sequences by young Bollywood stars, however, it sparked through a dazzling innings played by India's captain, Harmanpreet Kaur. This was the ideal beginning to a tournament that could change the face for the betterment of women's cricket in India, forever.

The WPL being played in the line of the fastest-growing sports event in the world, the Indian Premier League, is a platform that highlights professionalism to the core.

In India, cricket has always had a serious following, however, it was looked upon as just a sport to play and enjoy. 'Amateur' was the way in which it was perceived and professionalism came about once it was suitably commercialized. The early days of Indian cricket were a good example of cricketers going to England to play in various club and county leagues to earn money during the Indian off-season.

The great Indian all-rounder, Vinoo Mankad, opted out of an Indian squad that was to tour England in 1952, because of his commitment to play for a club in the then-famous Lancashire League. His return to everyone was that he needed the money to live.

Fortunately for India, Mankad's club allowed him to represent India and they were compensated for the matches that he missed while doing so. After a serious and humiliating loss that India suffered at Old Trafford against England, Mankad was recruited to bolster the side. He stood out like a knight in shining armour, through his stupendous feat at the Lord's by his brilliant performance, the best-ever by an Indian cricketer.

Indian cricket still did not accept professionalism. Ramesh Surti and Karsh Engineer were both not considered for selection for India's tour to the West Indies in 1971, solely because they were playing in Australia and England, respectively.

One saw the gradual change of recognition and realisation that came out in Indian Men's cricket. They were seen as professional athletes and were being compensated for their efforts. The multi-media world gave them a stardom image and Indian men's cricket grew exponentially. It is truly heartening, therefore, to see that the women cricketers too have finally stepped their mark. However, with such exposure, they need to completely change their mindset and approach to the game.

In the initial matches of the WPL, one can see that apart from a few top Indian players, foreign players are hogging the show. The issue that arises is that as paid professionals, the mental approach to how one plays changes quite significantly. Playing for one's country, state or club team is totally different from being paid to play. This is why in the earlier days, male cricketers went overseas to play professional cricket.



Unfortunately, the simplest calculation that arises is the money that one is paid vis-a-vis one's performance on the field. This brings about pressure which is quite different from what one normally encounters.

The Indian women players, apart from a few, are still in a nascent stage as regards the game of cricket and their mental approach to it. The system in India has still not been fully put into place to deliver 57 quality players. The 30 foreign players have played franchise-based cricket before and are therefore more well-versed in how to approach their game. This is where many of the young, unknown and inexperienced Indian players are finding it difficult to cope.

A couple of areas that need significant improve-

ment amongst the Indian cricketers are fitness and fielding. Playing under lights in a stadium full of loud energetic spectators can be quite unnerving. Furthermore, one is also aware of the millions watching one's every move on the multi-media platforms and this too can be frightening for one not yet at ease with it. One is, therefore, seeing plenty of fumbling while fielding as well as dropped catches. Nerves play a big part in it.

The WPL, like the IPL, will be superb for the growth of women's cricket in India. Parents, many of them reluctant to let their girls play the game because of various reasons, may look at it as more acceptable. To see one's daughter or relative on television and earning while doing so, is in itself a wonderful feeling for ones near and dear ones.

The platform is now set for Indian women's cricket to progress by leaps and bounds. However, there is still a long way ahead for them to reach the quality of cricket which will make them proud. To do so, a proper structure of academies, tournaments and infrastructure needs to be put in place.

The BCCI has the capabilities and funds to make their dream come true.

The spark that has been ignited in Women's cricket through WPL needs to light a flame that will keep it burning for years to come. Cricket will now not be called a 'Gentlemen's game' but one which is played by 'Gentleladies' as well.

(Yajuvindra Singh is a former India cricketer. The views expressed are personal)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Aja Bhambhani

Sunday, MARCH 12, 2023

**'Birthday Forecast'**  
Moon in Mercury on your 10th return chart. The time will be profitable. You will be busy in your work/business. If you plan to change your staff or your job, then it is the right time to do so. You will take care of your health. The confidence that you are having in your mind will come to an end. You will be working hard to meet and reach out to others. You will adopt new marketing strategy to promote your business. You will be involved in research. This is the time to cash in all your hard work. You will have profits in your business. You will be much tied and admired by one and all. Your popularity will grow in society and family. Students will get success. All the important and key functions will be taking place. Marriage of a family member will get finalized. You will get success in politics, media and sports.

**'This week for you'**  
**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)** New prospects are lined up for you. This week which will be full of challenges and efforts that you will be putting you will be victorious in the end. You will also avert a major crisis in your job. You will also solve all the misunderstandings and disagreements with a clear approach. In the end, your colleagues will be much happier and satisfied. Jupiter will be in boosting your career. Husband and wife will be in a harmonious bonding. Students will focus on their work and targets. Your income will also increase. You will also get involved in a new romantic relation with a person working in your club/house place. You will take a decision regarding your marriage. 

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)** It will be a successful week. You will get success in all your work. You will get a chance to meet lots of people. Your communication skills will be second to none and you will progress ahead in your work. You will also finish your important work quickly. You will also have a tremendous meeting with people and get the popularity. There will be a wide respect for your balanced views. It is right time to decide about your marriage. Your earnings will also rise and you will have your money for future. There is strong possibility of meeting an old friend to catch up of yours. 

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)** As your work gets completed, you will be very happy. You will have money in your hands and you will spend it wisely. Positivity will be all over you. You will have no disagreements with your family members. In your business you will get success as you will be more clever than your rivals. You will be a planner in your feelings that you will be able to win all new clients. There will be peaceful and cordial atmosphere in business and on the home front. Love birds will have a great time. You will plan to buy the real property. You will participate in wedding/birthday functions. Students will get success in examinations. 

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)** The week is turning out to be a fruitful one for you. You will be well behaved, charming and polite. You will be surrounded by your admirers. There are chances of excellent and successful news from somewhere coming that will lift your spirits. You will have monetary gains. Thus, you will plan to buy a new house, flat or land. If you own a house, you will undertake the renovation. You will spend lot of time with your family. Your time will be spent happily. You will meet of new persons in your work. You will also complete your paper work related to health, insurance, accident insurance etc. You will devote to your work and business. 

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)** It is a time for property gains. You will get benefits in the purchase of property. There is strong possibility of sudden monetary gains. You will also be able to finish your pending work. You will also think about the pension scheme. The time will be progressive. There will be good returns in your business. You will have loving relations with your spouse/partner. Marriage of a family member will get done. There is a strong possibility of sudden monetary gains. You will be much ahead of your rivals in business. Dispute about property division and partnership division with a partner will get resolved. You will clear some major competitive exams. Those who are in government service will get promoted. 

**Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)** Your health will be the subject of your programme you need to be careful. You need to keep an eye on your health. You will focus on your work and will get success also. You will get success in an interview. You will also enjoy your romantic life. You will have a deep love for your partner. You will also get financial an expensive item. You will be financially stronger. You will also receive some important news. You will meet an old friend of yours. You will have mental peace. Married couples will be happy with each other. You will start in sports and recreational activities. The misunderstanding that you were having with your siblings will come to an end. 

**Libra: (September 23 - October 23)** Those who are in creative fields will get lot of success. You will share your feelings with your near ones. You will also have gains in partnership business. There will be no shortage of funds. There will be good time for waiting together as a team to achieve your goals. You will have good balance with your children. You will also travel extensively because of work. You will also participate in meetings and functions. You will also plan to change your job. There will be an opening of new aspects of progress in business. There will be satisfaction due to charitable or social work. There will be business with the partner or family members. Guests will arrive at your home. 

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 23)** It is time for gains. You will have business profits. Your nature will be sensitive and you will behave with love. You will be much liked and admired. You will also clear some examinations. You will also get a new job offer. It is a favorable time for you. You will complete your work as per your interest. You will get a lot of fame and fame for yourself. You will also be full of enthusiasm. You will also feel relieved and enjoy yourself. You will plan to buy a new house. You will also refurbish and decorate your house. Don't lend money to everyone, or it could get stuck. 

**Sagittarius: (November 24 - December 23)** The number of your contacts will expand. Thus you will be sitting in an advanced position. You will be able to achieve your aims and objectives. You will be in a strong and secure financial condition. There will be an inclination to do something new at every moment. There will be inflow of money. The graph of your respect and prestige will also go up. You will be successful in competition and exams. You will get along well with your partner. A worry that was nagging you for a long time will come to an end. You will work with honesty and will not compromise with your self respect at any cost. 

**Capricorn: (December 24 - January 20)** Things are going the positive direction for you. You will confront a tough challenge in your work. But your efforts will be eminently successful. You will receive a gift from someone close. You will buy new items for your house according to your budget. Your new understanding with your partners or partner may eventually get resolved. Love partner will have a wonderful day. At home happiness and peace will be there. You may explore business possibilities. Media, art and creative sphere may flourish for you. You will have a meeting with your boss to discuss vital matters in your business. It is a favorable time to get a new gift or honor. You will have plans to buy a new house or vehicle. 

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)** The week will be spent in grand manner. You will be surrounded with difficulty but you will overcome them in style. Jupiter and Saturn will bring prosperity, money and happiness in your life. You will achieve many successes. You will take a loan from someone close. Mercury is a helping hand for you in hour of crisis. You will have multiple sources of income. You will also explore your contacts to get services. As a result, your letter will be in your hand. Seeing a believing hand can't believe anyone unless you hear the truth yourself. Money will keep coming. Lovebirds will have a great day. You will plan to buy a new vehicle. Functions related to engagement or marriage will take place. 

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)** There is a positive enhancing day. You will have gains in business and sports. You will finish nicely with everyone. Even strangers will have nice feelings towards you. The difference between husband and wife will come to an end. Jupiter and Venus will increase your prosperity. You will be devoted to your partner. You will be having a bonding with your siblings. You will be in a good mood. You will get good fee and will buy nice clothes. Your guests will overcome all situations and emerge victorious. Keep a check on your business credit. Be careful in your financial dealings. Students will clear a major competitive examination. 

## Casual Sexism: A big 'No' at the workplace

By N. Lothungbent Humsae

Sexism is a prevalent issue that women all around the world face, both personally and professionally. At the workplace, this takes a more subtle, indirect form and is termed 'Casual Sexism'.

Women are frequently subjected to snide, deceptive, and flippant statements disguised as comedy, concern, or compliments, which most people fail to notice. These could include remarks such as "you look great for your age" or "you are so fit having just delivered a child", while these statements appear to be innocuous, they serve to maintain and reinforce the engrained stereotypes and biases against women.

While most organisations have a zero-tolerance policy against any form of harassment and bullying, speaking like casual sexism often goes unnoticed, unspoken or unreported, and overlooked. Most women do not report, as they feel this is 'normal' or are often told that they are overthinking. This stems from our own social conditioning, where this kind of sexism is embedded in our culture.

So, what is the solution? How can organisations address casual sexism in the workplace? These ongoing comments over time negatively impact women, which can lead to feeling underconfident, anxious, developing a sense of fear to severe mental health issues forcing most women to quit the workplace in turn limiting their career progression," says Smitha Chellappan, the Head - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Interweave Consulting Pvt. Ltd.

According to Smitha, there are some strategies that organisations can implement to address casual sexism in the workplace. "Creating awareness through training programmes for all employees on what constitutes sexism and how to respond to it. Along with the training programmes, it is also important to create an environment of psychological safety for employees to be comfortable speaking up and reporting discriminatory behaviour or biased comments. Implement policies such as anti-discrimination or zero-tolerance policies with detailed reporting mechanisms and communicate the policies clearly to all employees. This must be reiterated by leaders in all the meetings and communications to employees. The onboarding team must make this mandatory information for all the new joiners in the company." She asserts, "Creating a culture of accountability where all employees across the organisation are held accountable for their actions and behaviour. Organisations must set clear expectations, provide timely feedback and take necessary actions against anyone violating this code of conduct. Develop allies at the workplace, who will step in and speak up when they see and hear derogatory comments or insidious remarks. Most importantly, When men become allies and call out each other for sexist comments, it sends a strong message that sexist language and behaviour are not acceptable. Provide coaching for women to identify and break the barriers holding them back to confront biases and sexism in the workplace. Women must reach out to people and groups who are willing to stand with them to address discrimination and harassment."

"The solution lies in education, consistent awareness, and collective efforts of all to bring about a change. There has to be a sustained commitment to challenge gender norms, and stereotypes and call out all kinds of discrimination and biases whether direct or subtle. Organisations must focus on building a culture that values and respects all employees irrespective of their gender or background. The change will take time but it is essential to stay on the journey and most importantly, for the senior management to invest time and effort to be strong allies and advocates for an inclusive and equitable workplace," concludes Smitha. (HANSI/ij)





"In the absence of justice, what is sovereignty but organized robbery?"

— Saint Augustine

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Revamp UGC

LEARNING is a serious pursuit, a tapasya that lasts through one's life. Learning transcends what one learns from written text and also spans the world of active life. A child begins learning from the day of its birth. While formal education has its eminent strengths including the kind of expertise and discipline that are inculcated among the young by way of formal schooling, glaringly, the higher education sector mostly under the system of universities and HTS etc in India has failed to maintain high standards. Several experiments in recent decades have not helped these institutions change with the times and change for the better. One such was the insistence since the 1990s that a PhD should be mandatory for lecturers/professors of all recognized universities. This 'enabled' them to get fat UGC-prescribed salaries. UGC chairperson Prof. Jagadeesh Kumar now makes it clear that doctorate would, from now on, not be mandatory for the post of assistant professor.

Academic circles were somewhat unanimous that the insistence on PhD, by itself, had not served much purpose. Rather, the standard of doctorates itself has fallen over the years, matching with the standard of the academic community as a whole. In global rankings, Indian higher education institutions are hardly ranked among the first 100 — a sad commentary on the quality of education that these entities provide. Over 13 lakh Indian students are studying in foreign universities as per statistics of the external affairs ministry. Contrast this with the less than 50,000 foreign students that come mainly from Nepal, Afghanistan etc to study here. UGC itself is known to be packed with incompetent 'academicians', mostly props of the political establishment.

India, that was Bharat, was the seat of knowledge and educational pursuits from time immemorial exemplified in its great institutions of learning like the Nalanda (in Bihar) and Taxshila that's now in Pakistan. Starkly, both Bihar and Pakistan have become anachronisms of a kind thanks to the sinking levels of political maturity and leadership. The process of democracy will be a success only when the polity demonstrates the inner strength to craft a competent and visionary leadership. While the Narendra Modi government provided political stability and strengthened basic infrastructure for the past nine years, it failed to address several pressing issues of the nation. Governments vacillated over attempts at effecting meaningful changes in the higher education sector. It required a war in Ukraine to shake the political leadership here out of its slumber — and know that so many Indian students were reaching such countries to get a degree in medicine and the like. Institutions like UGC need to be urgently revamped. Old mind-sets must change.

Letters to the Editor

Delay in Meghalaya Police Recruitment

The Meghalaya Police Recruitment process has been marred by delays, causing frustration and disappointment among aspiring candidates. This has been a persistent issue in recent years, with multiple instances of delays reported in various stages of the recruitment process. While the reasons behind these delays are varied, it is clear that urgent action is needed to address this issue and ensure a timely and efficient recruitment process. The state government needs to take urgent action to improve the recruitment process. This includes investing in infrastructure and resources, recruiting and training more personnel, and ensuring greater transparency in the selection process. The government should also work closely with the police department to identify the specific challenges and roadblocks in the recruitment process and develop a plan to address them. It is to be noted that the improvement in the transparency of recruitment process has also given hope for aspiring candidates. There have been allegations of favoritism and corruption in the selection process in the past, which further erodes the credibility of the recruitment process. However, this issue has not arisen since the 2016 recruitment as mechanisms have been put in place for greater transparency in the selection process, with clear criteria and guidelines for selecting candidates. In the case of the Meghalaya Police Recruitment is one of the most transparent as compared to other departments of the State Government. In conclusion, the delay in Meghalaya Police Recruitment is a serious issue that needs urgent attention. The state needs to invest in the necessary infrastructure and resources to conduct timely and efficient recruitment. It is also important to ensure greater transparency and accountability in the selection process to restore public trust in the recruitment process. Only by taking these steps can the state ensure the safety and security of its citizens.

Will MDA.2 again say, 'Let them eat cake'?

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The phrase "let them eat cake" signifies insensitivity and detachment from the sufferings of the common people. It indicates ignorance on the part of the rulers and the unwillingness to learn of the ground realities. Although not unanimous amongst historians, the phrase is largely attributed to Marie Antoinette around the time of the French Revolution when there was a famine in that part of Europe. Her reply to reports of bread-starved people in the country was, "let them eat cake." Since then, the phrase is used to depict a damning attitude of the government authority towards people and the other way round, the hatred of the commoners towards those in governance. The MDA 1 (2018-2021) had three specific instances (apart from many others) when their response fits, "let them eat cake." It is necessary to remind us of these as it is a norm that the past moulds the future. The intention is that MDA.2 would take cognizance of such it and perform better this term. The specific focus is on 3Es.

When the education performance grading index (PGI) report 2021 placed Meghalaya as one of the worst states, the then Education Minister Lakhmen Rymbai lodged the matter and instead pointed towards Meghalaya's improved performance over the period 2017-18 to 2019-20. The fact that the aggregate scores out of 1000 were only 584 for 2017-18, 610 for 2018-19 and 649 for 2019-20 representing an increased rate of only 5.2% was totally ignored. On the important domain 'learning outcomes and quality', the score remained constant at 126 (out of 180) for the three years. It would have been fair to expect a concerned and worrying response from the minister. Rather, what came out was "let them eat cake."

Notably, the education scenario has not improved much in the recent reports too. With the MDA 11 having a second go at governance, can we expect things to be better? Apart from the general observations about poor buildings, communication technologies, absence of teachers, two issues require urgent attention. Firstly, the textbooks that are being used currently in the schools need to be revamped. The students will have to compete at the national level and the advent of CUEET has enhanced the urgency of the matter. It makes sense for MBOSE to consider using NCERT text books from now on for all classes and streams of study. Any lingering concerns about lack of content on Meghalaya in NCERT books can be addressed by assigning teachers to develop such reading materials. Secondly, despite much financial investment in education, nothing much has happened on the ground. One reason for this is the lack of monitoring. The establishment of a specialised monitoring agency/commission which is free from political interference can bring about the much desired change. It will hold the stakeholders in education development responsible and accountable for any shortcomings.

In May 2021 when Meghalaya was under lockdown due to the second wave of Covid-19, Deputy CM Prestone Tynsong said that people should eat rice and vegetables instead of meat. This was in reply to the question of increased prices of cereals and large scale unemployment due to the pandemic. Since the loss of jobs had drastically reduced purchasing power, such a return by him was downright insensitive and irresponsible. That time, the price of vegetables had skyrocketed. The unemployment rate was high and many were struggling to find credit purchases. Hence, what he said was nothing short of "let them eat cake."

change in the political ecosystem of our State. Either way, the reasons for leading to complete washout of UDP is not far to unfold. In my social interaction with the Garo friends, I've queried about UDP's failure to strike a chord with the electorate in their region. Their response has been somewhat intriguing when they say that Garos have a deep-rooted conviction that as far as party affiliation is concerned they are of the opinion that the UDP is a party that is purely for the benefit of the Khasi-Jaintia ground and, hence they harbour a mortal fear that if UDP will attain majority their societal needs-based interests shall be by and large compromised and they don't want to be subservient to others, hence the UDP ending with egg on its face in Garo Hills! Additionally, let us forget and if my memory serves me right, in the 2018 Meghalaya assembly elections too the UDP drew a blank in Garo Hills, notwithstanding the fact that UDP had electorally allied itself with the Garo National Council. Mr Paul Lyngdoh, on the day of his being selected as cabinet minister, when asked by the journalist on his feelings on joining the NPP-led Government, aptly retorted that UDP had won 49 seats but only 11 candidates were elected so the voters are to be queried for this defeat of the remnant of

MDA 2 the opportunity to address employment through proper planning. What is needed is to identify economic sectors with the potential to employ many with promising monetary returns. One such sector is agriculture. Around 68% of Meghalaya's population depends on agriculture for livelihood while it contributes only 30% to the state GDP. This dichotomy in scale and returns have to be properly researched. It can be argued that it is so because the bulk of giving money that would last a week... it would be better to invest in long-term in order to increase the per capita income of the people. For example, in the case of both agriculture and tourism, a public-private partnership model would work very well in marketing networks. There are many enterprising marketing graduates who would jump on the opportunity.

There's much work to be done on irrigation facilities, approach roads, quality checks, packaging, help, training of workers, etc. The point being, just provide good infrastructure and see the people and the communities come together and transform. If this argument is not convincing enough, MDA 11 can do its own bit of research and realise how many villages have been able to develop not because of subsidies but because of infrastructure. Governance has to shift from killing the spirit of enterprise and entrepreneurship towards agency and empowerment.

In the end, MDA.2 has a wonderful opportunity to reverse the trend from "let them eat cake" to "let them have development." But, will it be sensitive and attentive to the aspirations and needs of the people? Will it be able to brush aside the claims of it being "high level" due to its past performance? Would it honestly and sincerely work for the development of Meghalaya and not be swayed by "push and pull" factors of favouritism, nepotism and insensitivity in public infrastructure development investments? Only time will tell.

UDP's contestants. Arguably, however, it may be reminded that the Hyniewrey community have voted in favour of the UDP in 11 constituencies and incidentally the UDP had won the largest number of seats among all the contesting parties in the 36 seats in Khasi-Jaintia Hills so Lyngdoh ought to place this question before the UDP leadership from Garo Hills for the no-holds-barred failure! Conversely, NPP, a national party in outlook, but in essence, a Garo Hills based party has not been looked upon as an alien by the Khasi-Jaintia communities given the fact that the electorates have elected no less than 8 NPP candidates, with respective margins at the last hustings.

Yours etc, Jerome K Diengdoh Shillong-2

Congress Party must revisit its vision

Editor, Approves of the special article "Analyzing the Congress and its revival progress" by Patricia Mukhim, (ST March 10, 2023) it was a perfect analysis of the Congress Party. The biggest mistake with the Indian National Congress is to appoint stooges as PCC chiefs and

Save our water bodies

By Barnes Mawrie

When scientists search for signs of life on other heavenly bodies, they always look for signs of water. This is because water is so essential to life. Where there is water, living organisms are sure to be found there. Our planet Earth abounds in water and this is the reason why so much of life thrives here. Evolutionists believe that the first living organism started in water here millions of years ago. From this simple organism, evolution of species and the process of speciation took place. But just as life started in water, so too survival of species depends on it. This is the reason why we consider water as so basic not only to us humans but to everything living on this planet. Plants and animals need water as much as we do.

Ironically, while three fourth of our planet's surface is covered with water, yet we are threatened with shortage of water. This is because the vast oceans contain highly saline water which is not suitable for use by us. However, fresh and usable water which are found in our rivers, lakes, springs and underground sources, continue to diminish or to disappear altogether because of our irresponsible human activities. It is pathetic to see that even in our villages far from the city, families

fish when we were children, now has become a dirty nala (drain) not fit even to wash clothes; the vast paddy fields (fields) which used to be an immense water source, today has been encroached upon by concrete buildings. In fact, we need to rethink its name today because it cannot be called Pynthor-umkrah anymore as there are no pynthors (fields) anymore. It is the same with Dhankhen which in fact means paddy field. How can the modern generation understand its meaning because they do not see any trace of paddy fields any longer? All this points to the fact that we in Meghalaya and Shillong in particular, have lost all regard for Mother Nature and in our pursuit of fleeting material well-being, have destroyed our own natural environment. For the material well-being of one generation we are endangering the survival of generations to come. Perhaps the most important question that this generation should ask itself is: what kind of natural environment do we want to pass on to our posterity? Is it a place bereft of beauty and utility that we want to inherit?

Therefore, it is high time that the government takes drastic measures to protect our still existing water bodies. Water bodies like rivers, streams, lakes, marshes, paddy fields, water catchments etc, should be safeguarded at their very best. Our state which abounds in rich forests and thriving rivers and streams should never suffer from shortage of this basic commodity. The truth in fact

"Water bodies should be considered as reserved properties of the government. On the other hand, villages could explore the possibility of creating more sacred or prohibited groves so as to protect water sources and plants and above all safeguard trees found in these places. Random stone and sand quarrying should be stopped by all means because they affect groundwater adversely. Instead only designated places should be allowed for such economic activities."

is that we are experiencing a shortage of water and as time passes this is becoming a major crisis. The cause of this is not difficult to see. It is a problem of our own making resulting from human greed and loss of respect for Mother Nature. The manner we treat our natural environment — cutting down trees wantonly, mining unscientifically, quarrying randomly and encroaching into rivers, is responsible for the crisis we face today. If we continue the way we are doing today in treating Mother Nature with scant respect, the next generation of our people would perish due to shortage of water.

This brings me to the main point of discussion, namely, how we should protect water bodies in our state. It is deplorable to see how people in our state destroy water sources and water bodies in pursuit of their economic activities. For example, the much talked about Wuh Umkrah and Umshyri which used to be big, clear and thriving rivers years ago, today are being reduced to tiny polluted streams, the lively stream passing through Rynjeh, Lapding and Lyngling where we used to swim or

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"Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier."

— Colin Powell

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Pension, pressure

UNIONS of government employees in some states are pressing for restoration of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), abolished by the central government in 2004. It had a defined benefit (DB) of half the last drawn salary upon retirement and this continued life-long and the family would continue getting it even after the pensioner's death. OPS was replaced by a contributory pension scheme, named National Pension System (NPS), under which a cut is made from salaries of employees during their service period towards payment of pension. Both central and state governments are bearing huge burdens in relation to the pension scheme for their staff -- a system that had its origin during the British period. The change in the pension scheme was introduced as part of Reforms by the central government based on recommendations from a ministerial group that found there was a "quantum jump" in the government's burden related to pensions after the Fifth Pay Commission report was implemented.

The Economic Survey of the central government in 2004-05 had noted that some 89 per cent of the people in India lived without any pension. Herein lies the rub. Demand is gaining ground that there should be massive overhaul of the pension system in India, and that the aged and the invalid across the board be brought into the governmental scheme of monthly pensions of the order of Rs 10,000 or more. This can be the basis on which the entire gamut of issues relating to pensions can be re-considered and reforms introduced in ways that the government's burden can be reduced. While the Vajpayee-led NDA government had set the ball rolling in the early 2000s, the Modi-led NDA governments have not taken the matter forward. At the same time, some Congress governments in states like Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and the AAP government of Punjab have reverted the pension scheme to the old (OPS) format. This was one promise that the Congress had made to win the Himachal polls this time. Government employees in states like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh etc are applying pressure on the government to revert to OPS.

Any government would be doing a disservice to the nation and the cause of Reforms if, on pressure from the employees, it reverts to the old system. Good governments function on the basis of principles; weak leaderships bend to the will of pressure groups. Selfish leaders go to any extent to win favours of segments of the electorate to remain in or grab power. No segment of the population should be extended favours over and above what is normally required. The cause of national growth demands as much.

Letters to the Editor

Can the Opposition Parties unite?

Editor, The recent election held in Meghalaya has proven to be amongst the messiest and most chaotic election in the history of the State. It was evident that the NPP would be forming the government with the support of other parties and although it seemed at first that the other parties were trying to find a common ground to form the government, the recent support by the PDP and the UDP to the NPP and its allies has made it clear where their interests lie. Therefore, what has happened and what will happen with these parties cannot change and NPP without a doubt will form the government for the next 5 years and it needs to be a strong government. However, other than a strong government, what the state also needs is a strong Opposition, an Opposition that will not just sit silently, but will also raise questions and hold the government accountable. As Quoted by the famous American short story writer

Ambrose Gwynnett Herece "Opposition: In politics is the party that restrains the government from violent inaction, undercutting its hamstrings." It is a must for the Opposition to ensure that the ruling party will not make mistakes or make laws that favour their own interests. The Opposition also needs to be strong as they are equally responsible in upholding the best interests of the people of the country. Similarly, the current set of MLAs in the Opposition who belong to different political parties need to find a common ground and work together by transcending their selfish interests and instead stand against the government as a strong and firm Opposition. Only then will the state truly experience democracy.

Your etc., Reskar Shishir Kharkeng Upper Shillong

Criticising India on foreign soil

Editor, While speaking in Cambridge (UK) wholeheartedly expressed his views on vari-

Why Christianise the Secretariat?

By Albert Thyrnang

"Do not pray to be seen by people... But when you pray, go into your inner room, shut your door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen..." (Adapted from the Bible).

This writer does not usually take refuge in any scripture because you will never with an argument by quoting holy books. There will be others who will use other verses to disprove you. An argument can go on endlessly. However, this time is an exception. On March 7 before the swearing in ceremony the cabinet ministers were seen praying in the chamber of the chief minister officiated by the Archbishop of Shillong. Later in the day, purportedly after the inauguration, the MLAs too were prayed over by a pastor before they assumed office.

This is a repeat of 2018 when religious leaders were also invited to bless the newly elected legislators. The intention of this exercise is to make a show before the media and the public. They were widely circulated on social media soon after the display. If the ministers and MLAs are so devout and religious why didn't they go to any church in the city to implore God's guidance prior to occupying the chair of responsibility? There are enough places of worship in the capital city and in the whole state. Let public offices remain completely secular. The bishops (ministers and MLAs) and invitees (religious leaders) do not understand the serious implications of such an act.

The state has a mixed population. It is true Christians are the majority. But there are also followers of Niamkhas, adherents of Niamkhas and other indigenous religions, Muslims, Hindus and others. They are also equally important. Why invite only Christian leaders? What about non-Christians? They also have just voted for the same representatives in the just concluded elections on February 27. Religion was not a consideration when they cast their vote. Their votes were also tallied along with all others on March 2. Then why were their votes 'Christianised' on February 27? This is completely insensitive to their sentiments.

But Christians are majority in this bill state is precisely the point. As we will see below majoritarianism is wrong and exhibition of it is very dangerous. Just because we are a majority does not mean we have to disregard other faiths. Tomorrow other forms

of prayers may be performed in the CM's residence, Raj Bhavan, Secretariat, Assembly House, etc. What will we say then? We have to accept it gracefully.

Concerned with charges of corruption against the MDA government, in May last year the church initiated the assembly of political leaders (the first of its kind) to ensure that a corruption-free government is installed post elections. The NPP that led the 'corrupt' government did not even care to attend the meeting. But soon after the elections the church hurried to shower its blessings on exactly the same government. It has now purified all of its previous wrong doings. I don't think, proceeding or subsequent to the ritual, the ministers were chided for their 'guilt' while in the previous government.

We are falling into the trap of the BJP, RSS and cohorts who are 'safronising' the country's institutions and the whole landscape of this nation. Since 2014 the brand of politics has been towards the direction of establishing a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). Hindua politics is not the same as the BJP gained power. Violence against and hostility to minorities, equating nationalism to Hindu nationalism, bringing in two-Hindutva laws and policies like stringent anti-conversion laws, anti-conversion laws, CAA and now the Uniform Civil Code (UCC). Granted state support, right wing groups have been taking the law into their own hands against the so-called violators in the name of gau raksha (cow protection) and protection of Hindus from conversion. The objective is to convert everyone in this diverse nation into accepting the Hindutva ideology.

We have heard RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat multiple times asserting that all Indians living in the country are Hindus by DNA. He even made the claim in Shillong declaring, quite explicitly, that Niamkhas and Niamare are within Hindutvam and hence Christians, converts from the two indigenous religions, are Hindus by default. No one made a hue and cry.

Education is the first target of safronisation. Textbooks are safronised. The new Education Policy has the stamp of safronisation. The lengthy NEP will be

used as a tool to spread the Hindu nationalist agenda. Higher education is the main target remodelling it to restore India's (Hindu) glorious past. Safronisation is fast happening. Scholars and intellectuals linked with the RSS and its ideology are appointed in educational and cultural institutions at the Centre and in BJP-ruled states. Cultural heads and vice-chancellors with RSS background are appointed in the Centre and the state-run universities. Through education safronisation will permeate to other democratic institutions and to every walk of life.

Today political institutions like those of the President of India, that of the Prime Minister and Governors are occupied by former RSS preachers or those subscribing to its philosophy. Even the Judiciary, including the highest, is feared to be safronised. A commentator writes, "...every unilateral act passed by parliament which was against any community had the backing of Supreme Court of India which has become highly safronised."

The RSS militant desire is to spread Hindu-first ideology all over India. To it minority Muslims and Christians should accept that India is a nation of Hindus. It even pushes for 're-conversion' to Hindutvam. Even if they don't they should live in subservience to the majority. The dogma expounded by MS Gohwalkar in branding himself as a Hindu nationalist Communist (in 'Banch of Thoughts') as internal threats is continuing today as well. Though the Indian constitution is secular in theory, Hindu majoritarianism and BJP's authoritarianism is trumping over the democratic values. To many, Muslims, Christians and Dalits will be further marginalised in the current environment.

We have no more right to protest against safronisation and majoritarianism. We can't counter the Hindutva agenda any longer because we ourselves are guilty of a different kind of fundamentalist attitude. The state government which is supposed to be secular invites openly leaders of the majority faith to pray over its ministers and lawmakers without consideration for other minorities. We are doing exactly what the RSS and BJP espouse. Our tongues are now tied and our mouths are shut. Tomorrow

the chief minister may well invite traditional priests, gurus or Muslim preachers to perform the rites. Where will it end? Secularism is the best. It is not anti-religion. It is impartial to any religion. It treats everyone equally. It does not offend anyone. We have to preserve it especially in Meghalaya. Let no public prayer of any form take place in the CM's residence or the secretariat or in any public office.

The swearing in ceremony of the chief minister and his cabinet was graced by Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and Home Minister, Amit Shah. The BJP president, Jagat Prakash Nadda was also on the dais. Why has he given such importance though he does not hold any high public office? It is crystal clear now that the attendance of the PM and Home Minister is an admission to the 'crime' of the MDA government in being the 'most corrupt government in India.' It was a cleansing ceremony presided over by the chief executive of the country. The BJP later confirms that the allegations of corruption are only a tactic to fool voters. Let no one believe the BJP henceforth.

The U-turn of the UDP and other regional parties too is not difficult to read. It needs courage, conviction and capability to be in the Opposition. The 'Hyniewter' parties have no guts to be in the opposition because they secret government for the last five years. If they were to join the opposition what will they attack the government on? They were a party to the alleged irregularities. Probably only Paul Lyngdoh is capable of taking on the government. But he was in favour of being in government at the outset. So the easiest way out was to be in power again.

The current Assembly will miss the services of some losers. Had the likes of Angela Rangal, Avner Parai and Mayborn Lyngdoh won, the House would have benefited more. Parai as legislators these losers are much better than the winners in their respective constituencies. Our democracy is imperfect. We still have a long way to go. Capability is not the upper most consideration while electing our leaders. The best bet would have been that everyone in the Legislative Assembly is a secularist for there is absolutely no alternative to a secular India.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Pegate and His Repercussions... With three distasteful incidents of fellow countrymen peeing on their fellow passengers while flying, I should have been a little more prepared before I ventured on my air travel. The determination the airlines now have in controlling the uncontrolled bladders of Indians while airborne, was not something I'd been warned about.

The wife was the first to wave me goodbye with just one hand, the other carried a parting gift for me. You know I can't take any cars onboard! I said good humouredly, while hugging her for her sudden show of love. "It's not easy!" she hissed,



"But diapers?" I accepted the packet hastily, and ran to my waiting car, where I found the driver had not put on the air-conditioner yet. "What's with you?" I asked angrily. "You know I like a cool interior when I sleep in?"

"Not when you're flying, sir," said the driver and looking at me sincerely, "it increases the urge to go to the bathroom! And if you do what that Mishra fellow did, you will lose your job. I also don't have a job! In fact, please tell pilot sahib to put off the AC in the aircraft!"

I didn't say anything as I clutched my bag of pampers, and it didn't help matters when while getting off at the airport, I intentionally left the packet in the car, but as I reached the security at the entrance, I heard the distinct, horrible nasal tone of my driver, shouting just behind me. "Sir, your pampers!"

The man at the gate spoke into his phone while looking at me and I felt like a fool. "I'm wearing the pampers!" I shouted shrilly. "She was just showing shy by telling me to wear them on the flight. I don't even know how to wear them!"

"And, where are they?" asked the pilot. I checked them in with my baggage! I said looking at my feet.

"We'll have to offload your stuff and baggage!" said the pilot. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have managed to nip another Pegate in his bud. I am sure you won't mind the small delay!"

"Because we are Indians," replied Shah. "Because we are Indians!" "True!" I say bitterly. "Very true!" I shake my head in shame as I heard my wife ask, "You think we should buy these pampers wholesale? Now that you've been blacklisted, the train journeys are much longer. You may need more of them."

"The Author conducts an Online Writers Course. For more details contact him on WhatsApp 989252383."

"That little bit of radiation from your phone could excite your bladder!" I nodded at his wisdom, and kept the phone back in my pocket, my sympathies now with three men who had emptied themselves, realising in all probability they had been in situations beyond their control that had put them innocently into the act of unbuttoning themselves in a non-peeing area. "Maybe it was radiation not the liquor!" I thought to myself

"The cabins were dimly lit as the other passengers and I were herded into the aircraft. I glanced happily at the liquor cabinet on my way to my seat, which glance was duly noted by the grim

airhostess at the counter. "Hello!" I said to the American lady next to my seat, who let out a scream, one, which made the pilot and I look at each other, the cockpit down the aisle and pin me to my seat. "Did he?" asked the co-pilot.

"I'm not sure," said the lady, touching her seat. "Look," I said, trying to get out of the pilot's firm grasp. "All I said was hello."

"Can I call your wife on your phone?" asked the pilot. "Sure," I said, dialing her number and giving the phone to him. "Hello!" said the pilot. "This is the pilot speaking. Is everything alright?" asked my wife. "I hope he is using the pampers I gave him. Please don't arrest him sir, he's a good man, and doesn't normally do things like this!"

"Ah!" said the pilot as he switched off the phone and looked at me. "are you wearing the pampers?" "I don't need them!" I shouted shrilly. "She was just showing shy by telling me to wear them on the flight. I don't even know how to wear them!"

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"Until we get equality in education, we won't have an equal society."  
—Sonia Sotomayor

The Shillong Times

Vol No. 147, No. 211 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 16, 2023

Film scene in Meghalaya

THE first ever Meghalaya International Film Festival (MIFF) was inaugurated on March 14. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma was to inaugurate the event but called off at the last minute. Minister for Arts & Culture and Tourism, Paul Lyngdoh had to do the honours. The presence of several noted film makers from Mumbai and award winning actors like Adil Hussain and Sanjay Suri and renowned directors like Onir and Amar Kaushik added its own sheen to the general ambience at the Soto Tam auditorium. Hosted by the Meghalaya Film Makers Association (McFiMA) the event however exposed the lack of camaraderie and cooperation among the local film makers. Well known film directors who have won acclaim nationally and internationally such as Pradip Kurbah and Dominic Sangma among others were conspicuous by their absence. Clearly the spirit of inclusiveness is missing here.

Commander Shiangplang, a journalist cum filmmaker who is the mover and shaker of the McFiMA broached the topic of a film policy for the State. This is no easy matter and unless all the stakeholders thrash out issues together the film policy will become just another piece of paper in the files of the Information and Public Relations files. In Meghalaya the congenial problem is that there is no public consultation on matters of public interest. On the contrary consultants will be used to write out a policy without understanding the nuances of the local cultures and sensitivities.

Minister for Arts and Culture & Tourism had in his inaugural speech stated that Meghalaya will become the destination for film makers which will in turn make the state a one-stop shop for film tourism. There is however the case of the local filmmakers who suffer from want of cinema halls or multiplexes where locally made films would be exempted from entertainment tax. The number of film makers is growing but the question arises about the quality of the films produced. Will they qualify to compete at national film festivals and competitions? Noted actor Adil Hussain made a fervent appeal to film makers to raise the standard of film making and not produce trashy films in a hurry which he compared to consuming fast food which has impacts human health. True many local films have been produced and shown in cinema halls but do these films actually send any message to the audience? Do they bring about behavioral change? Do they look at issues that afflict sections of the society or are they all about one genre – romance? Why are there so few documentaries produced in and from Meghalaya? These are questions that need to be intensely deliberated.

Letters to the Editor

Shillong's dwindling walkways & views

Editor, Walking along Shillong's streets used to be a pleasure. Views of surrounding hills, forests, valleys, and meandering streams provide a rich experience. Today, we are shunting out that view completely. The vast majority of streets, lanes, and alleys are congested with vehicles, and hoardings, high walls, banners or buildings are now obscuring the view of the city.

Take the instance of Shillong Club an iconic structure pleasing to the eyes and heritage in nature. Sadly this too is now being blocked out by a retrogressive high brick wall under construction. The wall is being constructed with a total lack of taste and aesthetics. Wonder who has decided on this high wall to desecrate this iconic public building. There was a hedge through which the structure could be viewed by the public, but sadly the inheritors of the club felt it wise to block it out from the public view entirely.

Shillong Club will now continue to be a gated club only to be seen and enjoyed by the club members and their families. At least the present managers should have, out of respect to the original creators of this club and the beauty of the city,

come up with a more aesthetically pleasing low wall using locally sourced stones with the upper portion designed in such a way that the building is visible from the outside. Sad indeed to say the least.

If this trend continues, all the tourist spots in Shillong like Ward's Lake and Golf-Link will soon have walls around them too. Perhaps it is time that the state government sets up something like the Delhi Urban Art Commission that would look into the overall aesthetic beauty of the city, including landscaping and preservation of the remaining green spaces and heritage structures in the city.

If no action is taken, this beautiful hill town of Shillong will soon be like any other city in India, and we will solely be responsible for it.

Yours etc.,  
Emicem Nongkyrinh,  
Via email

Let's get rid of self-righteousness

Editor, As the saying goes "it takes two to tango," so too when we speak of a corrupt institution, we need to understand that the fault lies not only with those in authority, but the others are as well culpable. In fact in my last letter, I have pointed out this reality and in the conclusion I had emphasized that the respon-

A road map for Meghalaya's Education reforms

By Manas Chaudhuri

The new education minister of MDA 2.0 Rakkam Sangma, is relatively a new entrant into state politics. His first press statement after assuming office indicates his focus is going to be on ushering in a paradigm shift in the state education scenario. As one who has travelled the road Sangma promises to take, I wish to share my thoughts on the homogenous task that lies ahead of the new minister and suggest possible ways out.

When I was handling the portfolio of Higher and Technical Education in 2008-2009, I had the opportunity to have a closer look at the way the system works. It did not take me too long to realise that the Department in spite of having efficient officers, was stagnating for want of fresh ideas and initiatives. Our first task was to engage the stakeholders for formulating a comprehensive Education Policy. That was the first such exercise in the last fifty years. The story of how Education suffered due to alarming indifference at the top.

We also undertook a tour of the length and breadth of the state—another first for the state—to see for ourselves the state of our government schools. These tours were a veritable eye-opener. The deplorable conditions of the institutions spoke of the official apathy at all levels. Inflation after inflation was being sought in a bid to dilute class rooms, leaking roofs, sorry state of toilets and the absence of girls' toilets, lack of inspection, rampant corruption and the accompanying officials' unmitigated embarrassment. The long and short of it is that barring releasing salary to the staff, the system had almost become dysfunctional.

To refurbish the scene is a daunting task. Only bold and radical steps can lead to a course correction. The question is: Are we up for it? In my considered view, it cannot be left entirely at the doorstep of the government. The thinkers, policy makers and the political class ought to get their act together. There has to be a fresh beginning bearing in mind, the stark challenges of today. Meghalaya will continue to foster in today's business with yesterday's technology. We need to think out of the box.

In this backdrop, I venture to offer my road map for a long term approach towards viability lies in the voters. However, someone had not read the conclusion well and made a prejudiced conclusion. In politics, especially in our country, a corrupt system is the making of both politicians and the voters. Let me explain myself. We voters are culpable of abetting corruption either directly or indirectly. Indirectly, we encourage corruption when we remain silent or do nothing about it. This is typical of our state where citizens debate boisterously on corruption at home, but are afraid to come out in the open. In Khasi we have a saying for this "kan rympei rom dohbar" (victors at home but losers outdoors). Directly, we patronize corruption when we, as voters, continue to vote for the so-called "corrupt" politicians and parties.

I do not intend to condone any corrupt government, as someone had misread and misinterpreted my last letter, but what I want to say is that it is wrong to point an accusing finger only at our politicians or government. We, the public and the voters in every election, are equally culpable. In the just concluded election, we all know how many voters have been bought by money and they have given their votes to the highest bidders. We are also aware that parties and individual candidates have shelled out a huge amount of money for the purpose of wooing the voters. It is all known too that in rural areas, candidates have to provide free liquor and food for the

Radical change in teachers training

To say that teachers are the most critical factor in the chain is like stressing the obvious. Everybody realises that in their hands lie the future of our next generations. These teachers need to be accorded training in modern methodologies. Delhi is a perfect example of how school education can be reformed through quality training. The Delhi government initially sent 350 cherry-picked teachers for an effective training as well as in Gujarat set up for training teachers. And the rest is history. Meghalaya must follow suit. Let us concede that it's not ministers or bureaucrats but essentially, the teachers who can make the critical difference. Our state should identify promising young serving teachers as well as the young aspirants who seek to make teaching their passion, and send them for such advanced training. This should become an annual exercise, preferably state sponsored. When we have a trained and motivated lot of teachers, half the battle will be over. No doubt, such a radical reform can only show results over a long period.

Cash-strapped government

The state government has been caught in a perpetual funds crunch. Almost 90% of the department's budget is gobbled up by the bill salary bill, leaving no other room for infrastructure development. Obviously, the state needs to find alternate means for supporting the system. I strongly recommend that we impose an "Education Tax" to mobilise resources. Deducted at source, the state may levy 5% from the salaries of private bodies on a win-win formula. Only those having proven a track record, local or otherwise, should be allowed to make a bid.

Retention of teachers

If we are honest with ourselves, we will concede that teaching cannot be another job *per se*. During the last few years, the retention of teachers has been driven largely by employment generation for the local degree holders. To what extent has this impacted the school education is hard to quantify. All the same, going by the level of general performance of tribal students in all India competitive examinations, it will become apparent that the system has less much to be desired. The decade-long drought of local tribal students' inability to crack the UPSC examination is a glaring case in point. The recent hue and cry over introduction of CECI underlines the point I am trying to make. It is my conviction that nothing will change unless we muster courage to break the stereotype. In this context, I would like my neck out to suggest that when it comes to recruitment of teachers, the Reservation Policy needs a re-visit. With a view to attracting fresh talents to the profession, let there be 50% reservation for the local tribal candidates while the remaining half be opened on merit alone. I am aware that the issue might raise hackles among the votaries of status quo. It may also sound politically incorrect, but isn't that an investment on our children? Perhaps, it would also offset the propensity for spending time and money on private tuitions and coaching classes.

Attract investment from outside

If Meghalaya has to become the one-stop education hub, the state will have to create a conducive climate for attracting investments from outside. If education has to thrive, there has to be competition for better education opportunities at the doorstep. What better than inviting the big players to invest in Meghalaya and making Shillong one-stop knowledge City of the sub-continent.

Let's leave out Government schools

In this country, there is something rotten about the government institutions, and Meghalaya is no exception. The government schools are run by and large have been on a downhill rath and there is no plausible remedy. The teacher-student ratio and the infrastructure are shabby and largely disproportionate. Therefore, it is a fit case that these schools should be phased out in a phased manner to private bodies on a win-win formula. Only those having proven a track record, local or otherwise, should be allowed to make a bid.

Parliament at a standstill

For the last two days parliament has been at a standstill and continuous ruckus is going on. Karnataka assembly elections will be held next month and the various political parties will try to take advantage of this predicament without taking into consideration the economic situation through which the country is passing. It was predicted six months ago that recession will come in from the month of March and the same is proving correct as two banks in the USA had declared themselves insolvent. With this recession, banking shares had been drastically downgraded. Due to the banking crisis in the USA the entire banking sector will be adversely impacted.

Yours etc.,  
Barnes Mavric Sidu,  
Via email

ratio. Indeed, Rs. 300 crore can multiply into projects worth Rs. 2,700 crore for infrastructure development at the school level. It is for everybody to see that our school going children de-served playgrounds, stadiums, libraries, better classrooms and furniture, besides exposure to digital education facilities, not to speak of learning music and honing the sports skills latent in our youth. They are missing out on the fundamental amenities since the state is simply unable to provide them!

Wanted Education Service cadre

The administrative edifice for overseeing the education sector needs to be revitalized by creating an exclusive cadre of officers under "Meghalaya Education Service" along the lines of the civil services, judicial service and the like. This singular step should be able to attract talents seeking to make an administrative career in this sector. Like all other cadres, there should be a provision for eligibility tests. Once the cadre is created, there should be better continuity of policy. The government should have dedicated IAS officers at the top of the pyramid to oversee the system.

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Yours etc.,  
Barnes Mavric Sidu,  
Via email

Right person for the right job

By Derek O'Brien

Ajay Hanga's appointment as president of the World Bank is an inspired, off-the-beaten-path choice that needs to be commended. A corporate veteran, a capable administrator and decisive leader, the former global head of Mastercard, a man equally at home in the developed West and the developing landscape of India and the Global South, Hanga was bringing an unusual twist to the job.

As Barga's country of birth, we need to ponder why people with a professional background such as Hanga don't make it to ministerial or government positions in India, except as a very, very rare exception. This is not a problem limited to one government era, but it needs to be said that even the 56-inch Union government has, over

talent, and so it proved – Uttar-topper in Delhi, topper at IIM Ahmedabad. We next met when I was in IITA in Kolkata and Nestle was a client. In 1992, when I returned to Delhi, Pizza Hut was looking for a marketing head. They didn't need to look beyond Ajay. His rise was meteoric. Citibank, Mastercard, London, then New York...

What can I add about Ajay that is not already known? Despite a high-pressure job, he is amazingly grounded. His wife and IIM contemporary Rita (IIM) – a top pro in consumer research – treat each other as equals. Through the years, they've made a special effort to create quality time and have brought up two lovely daughters. Last year, I was invited to the wedding of one



of the Barga girls, Kolkata puchkas were on a wedding menu in New York – a lovely thank you to the city that still means so much to Ajay and his family. Ajay's leadership comes with an integrity that commands respect. In the aftermath of 9/11, his then employer Citibank – was concerned about his safety. After all he was a brown-skinned man in a turban at a time when accusations of racial profiling and even stray attacks on those who "looked different" were unfortunately not unknown. Ajay was offered a private

the past eight years, hardly experimented with outside talent. When it has brought in non-politicians, it has tended to favour retired bureaucrats or party historians cum ideologues. When she came to office as Chief Minister in 2011, Manuza Banerjee thought out of the box and made economist Anir Mitra finance minister of West Bengal. I wish we had more such examples in our country. Wish Ajay Hanga was serving in New Delhi, rather than here merely for the sake of enabling her children. If we fell to see the writings on the wall, we will be letting our children down. There is no soft option.

As Barga's country of birth, we need to ponder why people with a professional background such as his don't make it to ministerial or government positions in India, except as a very, very rare exception. This is not a problem limited to one government or era, but it needs to be said that even the 56-inch Union government has, over the past eight years, hardly experimented with outside talent.

He has been a close friend for over 30 years, and he was a key figure in my professional journey. In 1988, Nestle hired me to conduct the Maggi School Quiz. I had a full-time job in an agency and the school quiz was a weekend affair. This and the new Nestle branch manager invited me to his office and put forward a new proposition: "Why are you doing quizzes only on the weekend for us? Why not quizzes in school during school hours? Why not quizzes Monday to Saturday?"

He was showing ambition to take the Maggi Quiz deeper into district towns, well beyond the big city. He was clear he wanted to tie the Nestle and Maggi brands with knowledge and wholesome learning. He got me thinking. Soon I resigned from my job and set up my own company. Maggi was my first major client. Mr Barga had changed my trajectory.

Since then Ajay has remained a friend. We have both moved to other paths, but the small things in life – including Ajay answering his text messages promptly – has not changed. These formative professional years in Kolkata were so fulfilling. As a mutual friend from those days, Sunil Gupta, recalls, "Ajay and I first met when he was a freshman at St Stephen's College, and I was in my final year. He was evident he was an exceptional

jet for travel for other cities and a company car to secure him from a subway commut. He refused. "Dealing with it is more important than hiding from it," he later said in an interview. He didn't "hide from it" in Kolkata either. In the early 1990s, the city was in famous for state-sponsored benches – thank fully a distant memory today, and on one such occasion Ajay couldn't risk taking up his Contessa, lest it be targeted by violent pro-bandh activists. But he had to go to work. So he requested a junior colleague, Roy Chatterjee, to give him a ride on his motorcycle. "I picked him up at 8 am." Chatterjee remembers, "and we drove down empty streets, with Ajay riding pillion. We chatted through the journey, he was so down to earth... Still is."

How will Ajay do at the World Bank? I'm not an astrologer but I can confidently predict two things. He'll give it a hundred per cent; and he will leave the Bank a changed and better place. He usually does that to institutions he embraces and individuals he touches. Ask me.

The writer is Member of Parliament and Leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Kolkata Sabha). Additional research by Amit Ghosh.

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"Pave your own path and be fearless."  
— Adam Draper

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No-LXV No-214 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 17, 2023

**Adani and polls**

THE Congress leadership is miffed that the ruling BJP is stonewalling it both inside and outside Parliament when the opposition seeks to raise the issue of an "Adani stranglehold" over the nation. The issue has acquired a new vehemence and seriousness after the US-based Hindenburg, with some startling findings, sought to break the bottom out of Gautam Adani's vastly spread business empire. Adani's survival instincts are strong and so is the backing he gets from the Modi-led government. Together, this might help the group overcome the present hit, which it got obviously below the belt. An attempt by the Congress to take out a march to the Enforcement Directorate office with a petition to investigate the alleged rule violations by the top-run business firm was thwarted by the security forces in Delhi on Thursday. Efforts by the party MPs to raise the matter in Parliament were repeatedly being drowned in shouts from the ruling benches.

A petition from the Opposition by itself will not be sufficient for a central agency to invest seriousness into the investigations of complaints against close chums of the government. This was so even during the UPA terms. Mukesh Ambani once said, famously, that the Congress party was his "dookan"—meaning, he could pay and purchase favours. CBI and ED do not have a mind of their own. The ruling party via the Prime Minister would call much of the shots. More so, when the party and the PM are in strong positions. For the Congress party, however, the "Adani" factor is a goldmine and it looks like the "last resort" or trump card to puncture the high credibility of the Prime Minister and outwit the BJP.

The Modi government had not worked wonders in its two terms, other than in select fields like Kashmir, infra growth etc. Still, public perceptions are that the fate of the nation is safe in the hands of Modi. He took steps like an elephant—slow but steady and affirmative—which gave reassurance to the nation. Even so, if the Adani empire cracks, the devastation it would inflict on the Indian banking system and national economy would be colossal. It's here that the Opposition smells an opportunity. The BJP edifice at the LS electoral arena banks fully on Modi. A crack to Modi's image, via Adani, could rupture the very foundations of the saffron party in the run-up to the 2024 polls. Politics is a game of one-upmanship. Ideology is for show. In the cut-throat competition, it is the survival of the fittest. Hence, all eyes now are naturally on Adani.

**Letters to the Editor**

**Ampareen Lyngdoh as Law Minister of Meghalaya?**

Editor,  
It's disheartening to note that Dr. M. Ampareen Lyngdoh has been allocated the Law portfolio amongst others and is now the Law Minister. The electorate of East Shillong Constituency must have taken wide over such high profile departments being assigned to their never-defeated and upright representative.

However, there is a flip side to this. Every conscientious and discerning person may ask how a public representative alleged in a criminal offense was entrusted with the high profile portfolio of Law and will now be in charge of the Law Department. Mechanically, the case goes back to 2017 when the Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya cancelled the appointment of more than 300 teachers who were illegally and irregularly selected in 2010 when Dr. Ampareen Lyngdoh was the Minister for Education. Additionally, the Hon'ble High Court, in order to get to the root of the matter had directed the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to probe the controversial teachers' selection process and the matter is still pending in the CBI Court at Shillong!

Is it possible that those accountable for the selection of cabinet ministers by swearing in the name of God, on March 7 last, were grossly ignorant about the conflict of interests here? But ignorance of the law and legal jurisprudence is no excuse whatsoever.

Yours etc.,  
Agnes Kharsheh &  
Andrew A. Jyrwa  
Via email

**People's mandate was for NPP**

Editor,  
Apropos of the news "People's mandate against Khasi CM: Snaibhaling" (ST: March 15, 2023 is very apt. Out of 100 electors in Jaintia Hills, 40 voted for the NPP, 31 for UDP and 17 for INC, leaving aside three parties that got a single digit. In Ri Bhoi, 31 voted for NPP, 27 for INC, 20 for UDP and 11 for AITC, leaving aside four parties that secured a single digit of 3 and 1. In Greater Shillong 28 out of 100 voters voted for VPP, 20 for BJP, 18 for NPP, 13 each for INC and UDP. In East Khasi Hills over-all out of 100 who voted 23 went to NPP, 22 to UDP, 20 to VPP, 12 to BJP and 9 to INC. In Western Khasi Hills over-all out of 100 who voted, 30 voted NPP, 27 HSDP, 18 INC, 9 HSDP and 7 AITC. 5 each to NPP and Independent and 1 to VPP. Over all in Shillong Parliamentary Constituency 27 voted NPP, 25 UDP, 16 INC, 8 VPP, 7 BJP, 6 HSDP, 5 AITC and 3 each to Independent and PDE.

In Meghalaya as a whole the NPP got 584337 of the popular vote which is 31.49%. The UDP got 300,747 votes which is 16.31%, AITC and INC got 255,742 and 243,839 votes respectively which works out to 14 and 13% respectively. BJP 173042 votes which accounts for 9.33 percent of the electorate while the VPP got 100263 votes which is 7.49 percent and the rest went to other parties like HSDP,

**MOOCs: Bridging the Graduate Skills Gap in Meghalaya**

By Dr. Sumarbor Umrol

There has been a significant improvement in Meghalaya's gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education in the last 10 years as it has steadily climbed up from 17.4 per cent in 2011-12 to 25.8 per cent in 2020-21, indicating an improvement in participation of the target population (18 to 23 years) in higher education over the years. As per the latest report of the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), there are about one lakh students enrolled in different academic programmes in 100 Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in Meghalaya, with nearly two-thirds undergoing undergraduate programmes in the 75 colleges spread out in the state. While the number of students admitted to colleges and other HEIs has increased over the years, the question that confronts us today is whether the post graduate bachelor's degrees secured by a student after spending two or three years of study in these educational institutions will enable him or her to be gainfully employed and flourish as productive members of the society. After all, it is now universally accepted that employability is core to higher education. The role of HEIs goes beyond imparting students with knowledge in an academic discipline to ensuring that they are prepared for the job market by equipping them with diverse capabilities, skills and attitudes required to be gainfully employed. Sadly, the situation in our state, and indeed in the whole country, is that higher education does not necessarily improve the employment prospects of our young people especially if the courses are non-technical and non-professional and do not offer job-oriented specialised skills to learners.

A Skills Report of 2022 revealed that only about 50 per cent of graduates in India have the required skills and are employable. Further, according to CMIE data for 2021, unemployment rates are the highest among graduates and those with higher degrees (around 20 per cent) compared to those with lower education levels mainly because the graduates coming out of our HEIs lack both hard and soft skills needed by prospective employers. In Meghalaya the situation is more acute as every four out of five HEIs offer only general courses (Arts, Science and Commerce streams) that impart academic knowledge but do not equip students with skills, understanding and attributes that would enable a graduate student to secure and retain a job.

So how do the colleges and other HEIs in Meghalaya overcome the challenge of producing graduates who are knowledgeable in the academic discipline of their choosing and at the same time proficient in certain skills and capacities required by labour markets? The way forward is for students in higher education to adopt a dual track learning mode by complementing their existing study programme for a graduate degree (on-site in a college) along with MOOC-verified courses acquired through online learning. MOOCs is an abbreviation for Massive Open Online Courses delivered online and designed for an unlimited number of participants and requiring no entry qualifications. It is an alternative to complete course experience available at a little or no fee. MOOCs became an innovative and disruptive force in education with the introduction of free online courses on artificial intelligence, databases and artificial learning by three Stanford professors in the autumn of 2011. These three courses attracted more than 3.51 lakh learners from all over the world. Since then, about 22 crore students have enrolled for at least one online course on one of the MOOC's platforms. As per Class Central listing of

MOOC courses, currently, there are 59 thousand such online courses offered by a number of MOOC platforms such as Coursera, edX, Udacity, Khan Academy, etc. In India, two such MOOC platforms are Swayam and NPTEL.

MOOCs are seen as an important platform for accessing skilling, re-skilling and up-skilling courses. They can play an important role as a complementary mechanism in bridging the graduate skills gap, particularly the digital skills gap in a state like Meghalaya. MOOCs have eradicated the constraints of distance and cost enabling anyone from any corner of the world with an internet connection to access courses offered by leading universities. For a small fee of one thousand rupees, one can earn a verified certificate for a completed MOOC issued by the university offering the course. MOOCs are therefore another flatter (as termed used by Thomas Friedman in his book 'The World is Flat') than has helped level the playing field in education. Some of the popular MOOCs are on data science, communication skills, excel, computer programming, project management, English and foreign language (Korean, Chinese), etc.

Within MOOCs, micro-credentials are job market aligned short courses of learning that are certified or credentialled and designed to help deepen one's expertise in a specialised topic or field. Micro-credentials are awarded to subjects such as business, computer science, and data analysis. They are part of a trend toward modularity and stackability in higher education, where a series of related

courses can be taken individually or the whole series can be completed or stacked up leading to degrees, also known as Micro-degrees or Micro-Masters. These are not degrees in the conventional sense but rather credentials or a badge. The advantage of these courses is their versatility as the content can be developed as per the changing needs and opportunities of the job markets while offering a deeper and a flexible learning experience for the learners.

Many universities around the world are offering these courses either in partnership with providers (such as Coursera, edX, Udacity and FutureLum) or on their own. In 2021 there were over 1500 plus micro-credentials with about 74 per cent of these in the field of business and technology. In India, IIMB has partnered with edX to deliver MicroMasters programs in Entrepreneurship, Business Management and Professional Certificates in Risk Management and Banking and Financial Markets.

MOOCs and Micro-credentials are seen as a new avenue for students to complement their conventional degrees with online courses that build their skills and capabilities for enhanced career and professional development. The role of colleges is to create awareness and disseminate information among the students about these new learning opportunities and guide them in choosing appropriate courses as per their background and interest. Imagine a situation where a student completes his or her three-year undergraduate degree in a work-ready but walks out not only with a conventional degree but also a verified MOOC certificate (or still better a micro-degree) issued by a leading university in the world. This is the way forward to addressing the graduate skills gap in our state.

*The writer teaches in Department of Economics, NEIGU*

rush and try to squeeze our way through no matter how constricted the space may be. Traffic jams appear to have become a way of life for us here in Shillong that we either have to leave an hour before time if we wish to reach our destination on time or be stranded on the road.

What happened yesterday was no isolated case. This happens almost every day. The roads are still the same and there has only been an increase in the number of vehicles every single day. When there is so much traffic, one tends to become restless and impatient. Road rage, especially riders of two wheelers who display several stunts at all times putting their lives as well as the lives of others at risk.

To come back to the crux of the matter, the previous government did not find a solution to help ease traffic congestion. I fear that this newly formed government will again do nothing for the players are still the same. Those in power will never understand the woes of the common people because they own a vehicle with a red beacon, siren and escorts who clear the traffic policemen to allow them to pass. The ones who suffer are common people like us. Until and unless the government gives priority to this serious problem such incidents of road rage, accidents and even loss of lives will occur from time to time.

**Protecting families from ruinous health care costs**

By Nachiket Mur

It was not like there was no cure. It was not like nothing could be done. It was just a matter of money, and there wasn't enough of it to save Palak (name changed), age 8. Palak was that child who beamed her big smile whenever she saw you. She loved to sing nursery rhymes and play clapping games. And then, she was diagnosed with blood cancer.

It would cost Rs. 15 lakhs for a cord blood transplant that would ensure that her bone marrow started to make healthy cells instead of cancerous ones. Medicine can now effectively cure not just blood cancers but many other conditions. The costs of these treatments can be high, however. In many areas of Mumbai, Rs. 15 lakhs won't even buy a small room. But for more than 95% of Indians, not just the very poor, this sum is as out of reach as a flat in the city—just like it was for Palak's family.

But families are not meant to pay these large sums. Health insurance is. That's why it exists. Health insurance is like the extra bulb on the Indonesian fishing boat, the *Jukung*, which 2000



years ago allowed them to sail across the Indian Ocean all the way to Australia. The additional bulb gave them peace of mind even when not using it because they knew it could stabilise their boat and prevent it from sinking when the ocean turned fierce.

For every family to have this kind of protection regarding their health in the form of insurance, lakhs of families would have to come together to share in these risks. This is achieved only when everyone is able and willing to buy their insurance and pay the requisite premium. This does not happen naturally, not even in more developed countries. Therefore, governments need to step in to help. Recognising this, most State governments in India already offer free health insurance plans, which are paid for by taxes. These plans work with thousands of hospitals, and the insurance pays all patient costs.

This is wonderful news, but comes with a two-fold problem: a) the current insurance plans cover many conditions but since they have been allocated very small amounts, they cover only 30% to 40% of the population. And b) even for those that they do cover, the insurance plans carry upper limits which are insufficient to cover the full costs of many major diseases. As a result, about half the payments under these plans are for amounts less than Rs.7,000 per event, which is too small to be meaningful, with only a tiny proportion (as little as 4%) of the claims being above Rs. 1 lakh. Is this good use of already tight government budgets? Or is it like trying to teach every body to swim in order to save them from drowning, which, while helpful, will involve a lot of wasted effort, when giving them life jackets would be much more effective?

With the very limited government money on offer and the need for protection being almost universal, the States would do well to use that money instead to offer

an insurance plan that covers their entire population (the poor and the non-poor) for only a limited number of very expensive and very rare conditions. Knowing that they have this coverage will give all their people peace of mind and stability, even though most will never use it. And, since the covered conditions are rare, even if each one costs lakhs of rupees, the total amount needed will still be within the allocated budget.

Offering this insurance coverage will allow State governments to take the time they need to build more robust health systems with the best of their health budgets. These can offer free care to everybody for everyday conditions that affect their residents (dengue, diabetes, high blood pressure) and for those that their insurance plans will no longer cover. With this new type of insurance in place, the government will have the comfort of knowing that if any household encounters a major health condition, their heart will not sink, and lives will not be lost.

Everybody is automatically enrolled, the need to check and recheck people's identity and enrollment status—a major problem in the current system—will also disappear. Covering the entire population will also allow State governments to use their purchasing power to negotiate lower prices for the most expensive conditions. Keeping prices at the highest-cost conditions at the largest hospitals in check will not only help the plan but also have a cascading effect on all healthcare costs, making it much cheaper for them to, eventually, build a healthcare system which covers all conditions.

When the massive shock of blood cancer hit Palak's family, they had no choice but to let her and all their State governments in India already offer free health insurance plans, which are paid for by taxes. These plans work with thousands of hospitals, and the insurance pays all patient costs. This is wonderful news, but comes with a two-fold problem: a) the current insurance plans cover many conditions but since they have been allocated very small amounts, they cover only 30% to 40% of the population. And b) even for those that they do cover, the insurance plans carry upper limits which are insufficient to cover the full costs of many major diseases. As a result, about half the payments under these plans are for amounts less than Rs.7,000 per event, which is too small to be meaningful, with only a tiny proportion (as little as 4%) of the claims being above Rs. 1 lakh. Is this good use of already tight government budgets? Or is it like trying to teach every body to swim in order to save them from drowning, which, while helpful, will involve a lot of wasted effort, when giving them life jackets would be much more effective?

(Dr. Nachiket Mur is a Visiting Scientist at the Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health. He was a member of the High-Level Expert Group on Universal Health Coverage for India (Svacheta). The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

PDP, Independent etc. These data confirm the statement made by the Hon'ble Deputy Chief Minister Snaibhaling Dhariba, "If they want a Khasi CM, let the people vote for only one party in the Khasi Hills. It is as simple as that. They can vote for the NPP or the UDP if they want to." This is the political reality in Khasi Hills and this signifies that the people in Khasi region are never united but free fragmentation. So the fall comes when one is divided. But there is nothing to worry about because even in 1972 the majority of the people opted for independent candidates rather than the All Party High Level Conciliation (APHLCC). Hence the history of fragmentation of votes keeps on repeating itself while we yearn for unity.

However, the statistical data above is an indicator that the people of Meghalaya to a large extent have accepted the home grown National Party the National People's Party in spite of all the odds during the election campaign where even Amit Shah used a 'Jhumka' that Meghalaya is 'No 1 corrupt state in India and most of the people in Khasi Hills believed the great Jhumka and started hurling abuses on the NPP but the NPP leaders kept their cool. Let us forget it was in 2014 when the BJP was on a campaign trail for the 16th Lok Sabha election when it promised that Rs. 15 lakhs would be credited to the account of the gulible people of India, which it never did and when the media questioned this, Amit Shah then the President of the BJP replied that it was an election juma. However the Government of India has rightly amended the Prevention of Money Laundering (Maintenance of Records) Rules, 2005 which is now effective from 7th March 2023 making it mandatory for banks and financial institutions to record financial transactions of politically exposed persons. Is this the new process of the Modi government to root out corruption? I hope not. So that it conforms to what the Pradhan Shree said nine years ago 'Na Khaingna, Na Khaan Doonga' (neither will I indulge in corruption, nor allow anyone else to indulge in it). Jai Hind!

Yours etc.,  
V L Lyngdoh,  
Via email

**No takers for UDP in Garo Hills**

Editor,  
Apropos of the letter "Zero for UDP in Garo Hills" (ST: March 14, 2023). I endorse the view expressed therein that many Garos are convinced that UDP is far and large a Khas-Jaintia dominated party and voting for it means a disadvantage for them. This was brainwashed into the Garo voters' psyche by none other than parties opposed to the UDP especially by those parties that dominate Garo Hills. This is nothing but employing the politics of opportunism by playing the communal card during elections. That is one aspect. The other important aspect is that the Garo voters are shrewd and intelligent. They always are wise in choosing parties and leader and usually go with those who can form the government. This was proved right from the time of Cap WA Sangma till date.

However, the UDP is not dead yet in Garo Hills. It still has a sizeable vote bank in Rajaboli, Salnampara, Memdohbar, Krongong and some semblance in some other Assembly segments but it is an uphill task for the State and

Garo UDP leaders to rebuild the party in the western region of the State. The reason why the party is not getting MLAs from this part is because the State party leaders right from the President and other top ranking leaders have totally neglected the UDP leaders and workers from Garo Hills. They do not even visit them occasionally and infuse in them the spirit of camaraderie and the warmth of party fraternity. Even financially they are left to fend for themselves. Political organisation, district meetings etc are totally left to themselves without the presence and encouragement of the party top leaders.

Even during elections the party candidates are given a paltry sum of only Rs. 2-3 lakh rupees each whereas candidates of other parties are assisted with Rs. 2-3 crore each. On party strengthening and organisation, UDP has to go a lot of introspection and go back to the drawing board if it wishes to make its presence felt and ensure that it can wrestle power in the state in the next election, else it will further deteriorate whereas new parties like NPP and VPP are eating away its support base. It is under the thumb and subjugation of NPP.

Yours etc.,  
Philip Marjint,  
Sr. Journalist,  
Shillong

**Road rage a reality in Shillong**

Editor,  
The road rage that happened yesterday at The Civil Junction is a real reminder to all that we have become so busy and have no time to spare that we will

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"Success isn't permanent and failure isn't fatal." —Mike Ditka

The Shillong Times

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State Power Scenario

THE new Power Minister AT Mondal is not saying anything new about the dismal power scenario in the State. Power cuts have now started from the wee hours of morning until about 8 am. This leaves the people depending on water to be pumped by the PHED into their residences in the early morning hours before they leave their homes for work, out on a limb. Successive power ministers have stated the obvious that the power sector needs a major overhaul. This was the answer given in the MDA-1 regime when a lot of what was wrong with the power sector was laid at the doorstep of the previous government led by Mukul Sangma. But five years is a long time to turn the sector around. There was enough time in the last five years to make the MeECL a profit-making entity. So what was the problem in the MeECL that made it a money-guzzling entity controlled by a few contractors? Are we sure that the same business nexus will not afflict the power sector?

The MeECL is a public sector undertaking and nearly all consumers, barring some companies in the industrial estates, are paying their bills regularly. Then why is the MeECL still functioning as a loss making company? The reasons for this should be put out in the public domain because the public have the right to know what is ailing their largest PSU. This is not a matter to be kept under wraps. The recommendations of various committees too should become public documents. It is good to hear the Power Minister speak about milestones or timelines within which MeECL is completely revamped up. There's a limit to how much people can take the load-shedding schedule when they are paying a tidy sum as their monthly bills.

At this juncture there's no point revisiting the past and remembering those glorious days when ministers would regularly make public statements that Meghalaya is a power surplus state. Since the early 1990's there were plans to unbuckle the Corporation and lease out the transmission and distribution part to private entities because they were unprofessionally managed. The question to be asked is - when in its history has the MSeB turned MeECL ever made profit? The fact of the matter is that the MeECL even today is an overloaded ship that can sink anytime and would have sunk if funds were not regularly infused into the system. And being a Corporation it is easier to get loans even from the open market. MeECL owes power supplies from the national grid and NEEPCO big money and every time the suppliers threaten to cut off power so that they can get their dues. How long can this carry on and when will MeECL really get out of the rut? For the Power Minister to blame the use of multiple domestic gadgets for high power usage is to actually admit that the State has not even planned ahead and foreseen that power usage will always go up. The people of Meghalaya deserve better.

Letters to the Editor

Revisiting Education in Meghalaya

Yes after the elections, after the formation of the new MDA 2.0, Meghalaya now has a new Education Minister. Education, at the risk of repeating numerous articles, lectures, lectures, seminars and whatever else there is in the galaxy of words for common public interest, had once been the flagship department of the state but unfortunately somewhere along the way we lost it. The Education Minister of MDA 1.0 had started off with an enthusiastic call for an Education Policy for the state, a committee for the same formed, met and finally came up with a draft for whatever its worth was. Unfortunately that gentleman quickly lost interest in his Department of Education and his draft Education Policy never saw the light of day. Probably, as it now appears, that he had something more important and interesting things and personal subjects to occupy his mind. To put it more brutally and candidly, the future of the students of Meghalaya never featured

in the priority list of the last Education Minister. We have never heard him mention them ever. The problem here is even when a minister loses interest in the subject of imparting good education, this aspect in our lives still continues. Jobs depend on it still impacts skill development; it still influences and determines careers. Inevitably and the future of our upcoming generations are controlled by it. In short, it touches the lives of both the present and the future. Hence in imparting education is a system of any Government. In the year of 17th March 2023, Dr Sumarlin Usir, one of the young rising intellectuals of the state has raised the need for bridging the Graduate Skills Gap on Meghalaya. A day earlier, Mantas Chaudhary an earlier Minister for Education himself had given a call for a Road Map for Education reforms. I am simply using the above two articles written scarcely one week

Warnings galore; make thyself sure

By Abdiel Susngi

"A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself, but the simple pass on, and are punished." Proverbs 22:3

The election results in Meghalaya and the developments that followed should be seen as micro level reflections and projections of what is going to unfold in the rest of the country in the next so distant future.

The success of the NPP in forming the government in the state, the coming of MDA 2.0, is in itself a blessing to the NPP; and why should it not be so, when the BJP finds no opposition in the NPP and its allies that are so readily unwilling to approve any aspect of its 'one size fits all' approach? It is also safe to say that the BJP is content with having only two members in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, since the other members of MDA 2.0 are already its most effective minions, who may as well openly declare their secret allegiance to the BJP, which in actuality is no secret at all. And whenever the BJP hears the mention of the NPP, it is common knowledge that the BJP hears itself being called in its anglicised form. There is also no shame for the BJP in piggyback riding the so called horse of democracy, so long as its agenda is served, and so long as it can make its way to the green pastures that is Meghalaya.

The biggest experiment in socio-political engineering in the North East took place in Meghalaya, and it was a success: voters, especially those in the Khasi Hills who had to bear the brunt of the majority of excesses of MDA-1 were hoodwinked into electing the supposed former friends of the NPP, who were so vocal in their opposition against the NPP during the election campaigns. Then suddenly, and most unfortunately, we were treated to a short play of sorts, the script of which had been penned with nothing but misdirection in mind and the sole purpose of which was to pave the way for the NPP's prodigals to return home, to give birth to MDA 2.0; a dream that became a reality with the blessings of the BJP, the first party to run to the open embrace of the NPP.

The coming of MDA 2.0 is an additional note in the history song of the BJP in the North East, joining the majoritarian chorus with Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Tripura and Nagaland. Each of the movements have only strengthened the BJP, emboldening it to work harder for Hindu Rashtra though not in full force and extent as of yet, but in sure instalments. The Sangh Parivar's confidence in the BJP as its poster child may

have never been as bright as it is today; for it is clear that it is just a matter of time and apathy before the North East is a colossus in gradual strokes and tints.

The National Government under the BJP has already shown its unending commitment in the march of Secular and Democratic nature of the Indian State, and if possible to change the Constitution itself. The attacks on the judiciary, with the tailored aim of undoing the Collegial system for the selection of judges to the Supreme Court, had even attracted the focus of veteran members of the BJP like Anurup Shourie, who in an interview with The Wire urged the Supreme Court to 'behave as if it is at war with the Executive in defence of the Constitution'. But, the BJP does not seem to budge!

The announcement to implement the National Education Policy was done without ever tabling it in the Parliament (while pushing for the same during the pandemic period so as to escape scrutiny), which is a blatant overreach and betrays the BJP's wild craze for singularisation and homogenisation; an espousing of the 'one size fits all' formula; its blind criticism and opposition from many conscientious academicians, statesmen, and even legislative assemblies committed to democratic values and federalism. Yet the BJP does not seem to budge!

Then there is the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), the declared scream of a policy that, when implemented, would transform the BJP's dream for homogenisation into a penetrating shadow that would engulf the civil, religious, and cultural peculiarities of the many communities that have learnt to accept the Indian State as its own. The threat posed by the BJP is not that of a hurdle for the BJP (Well, one may refer to organisations like the Kesavananda Bharati Case in 1973 that restricted the parliament's powers to amend what could be termed as the 'basic structure' of the Constitution. However, unfortunately the phrase 'basic structure' was interpreted by the Supreme Court as its meaning, and therefore, it is open to interpretation. Considering the tussle between the Central Government and the Supreme Court at present, and the arbitration

modal Modi give on the public perception at the moment that the country is at large safe in his hands. The editor has also rightly observed that "a crack to Modi's image via Adam could rupture the very foundation of the saffron party" in the up to the BJP Lakh Sabha Election. If this happens there is no second rank leader in the BJP to undo the rupture. I agree with the editor that "Politics is a game of one-upmanship ideology for show." Hendrik Herzberg, American journalist, speech writer of the 39th President of USA Jimmy Carter, editor of Obamaism - "The rise of new political era and politics, has this to say on political ideology "A political ideology is a very hard thing to have. It is a real time saver because it tells you what you think about things you know nothing about."

of the government, the latter may have its way and infiltration could well happen, thereby, weakening the position of the Constitution's guardian, a precaution that should best never be realised, and we have to understand that the BJP does not seem to budge!

Coming back to our beloved Meghalaya, we are glad to still have political parties that refuse to support MDA 2.0, and we pray that they remain to do so; however, it is disappointing to know that as of now the opposition is fractured, and there is no leader of the Opposition as yet. The INC and the AITC have well established themselves as two of the most anti-fascist, anti-majoritarian and anti-BJP parties in India today. The emergence and success of the VPP as a neo-Khasi ethno-nationalist, populist, moralistic, grassroots party with shades of social democratic distinctives have shocked many of the aspiring political pundits of our state, and its staunch opposition to the NPP and the BJP have placed it on a level field with the INC and the AITC, even though the common ground these three find themselves on seems to be non-existent, at least to the leadership of the three parties.

While many may scoff at the statistics and data, and even malign such information as foreign propaganda, it would be wise to first interact with Indian Missions to know the ground reality. However, while Christians are identified as the most persecuted religious group, other religious groups and communities are also being targeted, attracting negative world opinion: Yet, still, the BJP does not seem to budge.

At this point, a brief but pertinent and concise reminder should be made concerning the amendment of the Constitution. It is a well-known fact that Constitutional Amendments require the approval of both houses of parliament (where the BJP is comfortably seated) and ratification by half of the state legislatures (and that is not much of a hurdle for the BJP). One may refer to the Kesavananda Bharati Case in 1973 that restricted the parliament's powers to amend what could be termed as the 'basic structure' of the Constitution. However, unfortunately the phrase 'basic structure' was interpreted by the Supreme Court as its meaning, and therefore, it is open to interpretation. Considering the tussle between the Central Government and the Supreme Court at present, and the arbitration

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In Nagaland, NDPP rises and NPF falls

By Thangnoi Haokip and Bikhang Zou

The 14th Nagaland Legislative Assembly witnessed the voters sticking with the status quo. The BJP-NDPP retained power, winning 37 seats in the 60-member Nagaland Assembly. While the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) won 25 seats, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 12 seats. The 2023 Assembly polls scripted history by electing two women for the first time. They are from NDPP and greenhorn in politics- Hekani Jakhlu (Dimapur III) and Salhatoun Knuse (West Angami). The assembly election also saw the NDPP's power consolidation in Nagaland. NDPP, today, is the numero uno regional party in the state occupying the space vacated by the Naga People's Front (NPF). The NPF, the oldest regional party in the Northeast, has suffered a setback in Nagaland, winning only two seats out of the 22 constituencies it contested.

The biggest winner and loser in the Assembly election results underline the emergence of NDPP as a regional party. The party was formed in 2017 and can still be considered a relatively new entrant in Nagaland politics. Since making its political debut in the 2018 Assembly election and winning the contest by stitching an alliance with the BJP, there was no looking back for the party. It steadily navigated the complexities of state politics with deft and pragmatic partnerships. In the process, it successfully ousted the position of the erstwhile dominant NPF from its political perch. The party has emerged more assertive, with its tally increasing from 17 in 2018 to 25 seats in the 2023 Assembly election. It, thereby, established its dominance in the state. This performance by the NDPP is a tall order for a relatively new electoral system, to quote professor Hansing, made the party the biggest winner in this election cycle.

The NDPP's future is rising, while the NPF is losing ground. The political prospect of the once dominant regional party in the state appears to be weakening. The party that ruled Nagaland for 15 years, from 2003 to 2018, was reduced to two seats in the 2023 Assembly election. This debacle was a far cry from the post electoral performances of the party. In fact, starting slipping ahead of the 2018 polls when Nephthu Rio quit, and the BJP struck a seat-sharing deal with the NDPP. The party suffered a hammer blow in 2022 when 21 of its legislators merged with the NDPP. Shinnoh by its once alliance partner BJP and ceding ground to NDPP, the party that tagged the highest in the last election with 26 seats is now the biggest loser, dwindling to just two.

Behind the rise of NDPP, Nephthu Rio and BJP's role Two factors determine the rise of NDPP. Nephthu Rio and the support of the BJP for NDPP would not have happened without Nephthu Rio. BJP ditched NPF and supported the NDPP when Rio defected from the former and joined the latter. Rio was a trusted ally of the BJP. The BJP saw him as a political asset to make further inroads into Naga politics. Rio, a former NPF, was instrumental in BJP ditching the NPF. This new political alignment acted as a catalyst in causing a paradigm shift in the state political power from NPF to NDPP. The NDPP, along with BJP, came to form the government in 2018. The two parties again formed a pre-poll alliance in 2023 and returned to power again. The NDPP's spectacular showing paved the way for Chief Minister Nephthu Rio's fifth term, a record that will eclipse SC Jamir's tenure as the longest-serving Chief Minister of Nagaland. Rio began his political career in the youth wing of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and subsequently joined Congress. He defected from Congress in 2003, joined the NPF, and immediately became the Chief Minister. Nephthu Rio again led the NPF in 2017 and joined NDPP ally

internal differences with the party leaders. A master strategist with expertise in forging alliances, he led the coalition of BJP-NDPP along with the support of National People's Party (2), Janata Dal (United) (1), and an independent to form the government in 2018, ending the 15-year reign of NPF in the state. He again proved his political acumen by striking a pre-poll alliance with the BJP in 2023, winning 37 seats to return to power. Rio's resilience, leadership style, and widespread appeal contributed to the success of the NDPP party so far.

Another success of the NDPP as a regional party is its partnership with the BJP. Before the 2018 Assembly election, the BJP ended its 15-year association with the NPF and formed a new alliance with NDPP. This breakup contributed to the downfall of the NPF and allowed the NDPP rise in the last few months of 2018 and 2023. The BJP supported the NDPP in forming a coalition government in the state. Though the BJP might be playing second fiddle to NDPP, it nevertheless plays an instrumental role in consolidating the latter's position in Nagaland.

Results of the 2023 Assembly election have brought the focus back on the NPF. The party that was in power in the state between 2003 to 2018 seems to be a pale shadow of itself. Though it was the single largest party with 26 seats in 2018, the NDPP outmaneuvered it by forming the government with the BJP and other like-minded parties. The party had to contend with sitting in the opposition benches. This year, the party contested 22 seats, and in the 'tied' yet multi-party electoral system, to quote professor Hansing, made the party the biggest winner in this election cycle.

The NDPP's future is rising, while the NPF is losing ground. The political prospect of the once dominant regional party in the state appears to be weakening. The party that ruled Nagaland for 15 years, from 2003 to 2018, was reduced to two seats in the 2023 Assembly election. This debacle was a far cry from the post electoral performances of the party. In fact, starting slipping ahead of the 2018 polls when Nephthu Rio quit, and the BJP struck a seat-sharing deal with the NDPP. The party suffered a hammer blow in 2022 when 21 of its legislators merged with the NDPP. Shinnoh by its once alliance partner BJP and ceding ground to NDPP, the party that tagged the highest in the last election with 26 seats is now the biggest loser, dwindling to just two.

Conclusion

The Assembly results of 2023 highlighted the trajectory of two political parties. While the political grip of NDPP is on the rise, the decline of NPF continues. The shifting of political wind from the NPF contributed to the growth of NDPP is on the rise, the decline of NPF continues. The shifting of political wind from the NPF contributed to the growth of NDPP is on the rise, the decline of NPF continues. The shifting of political wind from the NPF contributed to the growth of NDPP is on the rise, the decline of NPF continues. The shifting of political wind from the NPF contributed to the growth of NDPP is on the rise, the decline of NPF continues.

The writers are scholars from the Political Science Department, Manipur University. Views expressed are personal.

The fear of the bureaucratic tool

Editor, Apropos of the edito-

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

# Growing trend of linguistic realism in Hollywood

**Everything Everywhere All at Once and other Oscars 2023 films highlight the trend**

At the 95th Academy Awards, Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* took home wins in acting, editing and directing categories, and also won the coveted best picture award.

The quirky and expansive sci-fiction film is famed for its boardist take on the idea of a multiverse, yet it is still grounded in realism and humanity. In one masterfully choreographed scene in *Everything Everywhere*, three languages are spoken by three generations of one chaotic immigrant family over dinner.

It is interesting how screenwriters and directors use language in film to do much more than just convey dialogue. Language and subtitles also provide characterization, establish the tone of a scene and ground fictional stories in reality.

Increasing use of non-English languages and subtitles demonstrates both a trend toward linguistic realism in Hollywood and also broader acceptance of linguistic diversity in a globalized society.

But filmmakers must negotiate the tension between narrative goals and audience engagement. By examining different ideologies held by filmmakers and audiences alike, we can also still sometimes find long-standing associations between foreign language and villainy.

**Languages breaking through**

As South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho described in his Golden Globes acceptance speech for 2019's *Parasite*, when audiences move past the "one-inch tall barrier of subtitles" a richer world of film awaits.

Telling authentic stories in a modern, globalized and multicultural world means fairly portraying the languages spoken and signed all



throughout our society. Hence, at times, the need for subtitles.

In another scene in *Everything Everywhere*, spoken language is eschewed altogether. Two rocks converse silently while gazing over a barren canyon, with black and white subtitles appearing on a bright blue sky. This simple yet emotionally resonant scene was somehow enough to move many viewers to tears.

Although Todd Field's *Tár* did not clinch any Oscar wins this year, star Cate Blanchett notched multiple other acting awards for her role as the titular orchestra conductor. In some of the film's best scenes, the maestro uses only German during orchestra rehearsals and subtitles are dropped completely.

Non-Germanophone audiences might not understand the words

Blanchett says, but they are instead encouraged to focus on the visual aspects of the character's communication: her facial expressions, physical tics and tremors and the building tension, both visible and audible, between her go and everyone around her.

The Oscar performance of *Naanu Naanu*, from the Indian Telugu-language blockbuster RRR, which received a standing ovation, was evidence that performances can cross language boundaries by leaning into creative elements far beyond words.

**Two sides of language representation**

The flip side of positive aspects of linguistic representation is that filmmakers, free to use the tool of multilingualism to provide characteriza-

tion and establish tone, and even to showcase threatened languages, are also free to use it to entrench certain linguistic stereotypes, namely the association between foreignness and villainy.

The warriors of the underwater Taloan kingdom in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* never speak a word of English. In this Marvel Cinematic Universe story, the fictional kingdom of Atlantis was repositioned as a Mesoamerican-inspired society.

The language of Taloan is the real-world language of Yucatec Maya, spoken by Indigenous people in present-day Guatemala, Belize and southern Mexico.

**Sharing an Indigenous language**

Yucatec Maya is stigmatized and marginalised in the geographic areas

where it is traditionally spoken, one of the long-lasting consequences of colonization.

But Coogler's creative decision to use Yucatec Maya as the language of Taloan, as well as to borrow heavily from Mayan and Aztec cultures for visual inspiration, has delighted some Maya-speaking Indigenous moviegoers who say they saw their culture represented and are happy to see the language widely shared.

Two strong minor characters, Namora and Attuma, speak only in Yucatec Maya throughout the entire movie, with English subtitles in an elegant blue script.

**Archetypes of antagonism?**

Yet, these characters are the primary villains of the story, portrayed as powerful and physically otherworldly. Thus, while the characters are not one-dimensional, their language seems to narratively underscore certain archetypes of antagonism, beyond simply showcasing a real Indigenous language of the world.

This is especially noticeable when contrasted with the protagonists, the mostly-anglophone Wakandans. Although the language of Wakanda is the real-world language of Xhosa, spoken in South Africa, in *Wakanda Forever*, it was mostly relegated to greetings and asides. Instead, the protagonists speak a kind of pan-

African accented English. Unlike in James Cameron's *Avatar: The Way of Water*, viewers are never explicitly told that what the audience hears has been "translated" for us.

**Refreshing to see, hear more languages**

In *Avatar*, which took the Oscar for best visual effects, the protagonist, Jake Sully, in a neat expositional trick, the main character narrates the beginning of the film and explains that he learned the alien language well enough that it just sounds like English to him.

This way, audiences won't have to read for the entire film, and the heroes (and actors) can speak only English without sacrificing the "realism" of the science-fictional universe. It has been refreshing to see, in recent years, many productions in film achieve critical and commercial success in the anglophone world despite being in non-English languages and using subtitles.

There's much more room for films to highlight both linguistic diversity as well as authentic characterization of characters who speak and sign with greetings and asides. Instead, the protagonists speak a kind of pan-



## India has not explored the horror genre in its truest form: Bhavnani



As the third Wench Film Festival, India's first horror film festival, founded by celebrity hairstylist-turned-filmmaker, Sapna Bhavnani, is set to take place physically for the first time in Mumbai from March 17-20, it will also showcase films inclusive of BIWOC, LGBTQ+ women, and non-binary filmmakers.

When Bhavnani first wrote a horror story *Beastlike Man* that was selected at BIFAN (Korea), the largest genre festival in Asia, she found herself to be the first Indian woman director to be at the platform ever.

"We were practically non-existent in that space. Over the three decades I looked at, 9.9 per cent of directors were women. Horror comes with just 5.9 per cent of directors being women and Sci-fi - 2.8 per cent. I find this statistic offensive. Wench 2022 showcased 47 horror/sci-fi/fantasy films - 43 of them directed by women," she tells IANS.

Believing that India has not really explored horror in its truest potential or form, the filmmaker feels there is no better medium to highlight social change than this genre.

"And there are so many different ways to make them instead of the cliché knee-jerk horror that we all know of," she asserts.

Talk to her about the fact that most horror movies from India tend to make the audience laugh, and she says it is high time that we move beyond.

"*Tumbhad* changed the game, but no one followed after that. We have a lot to grow and hope that in the next few years, we can be on the whole platform since our background lends to this format so naturally. India is a country of many religions and each has its own superstitions and rituals. When I hear Indians saying they do not like horror, I laugh as we are the land of spirituality which starts with spirit."

The festival programmers include Shelagh Rowan-Legg and Heidi Honeycutt, who runs her own women's genre fest in the US - Etheria. Wench will open with the award-winning Mexican film *Huacua: The Bone Woman*, directed by Michelle Garza Cervera, and close with *The Nightmare*, directed by Alice Wadding.

It will screen 23 Indian and international films in competition,

including Aarti Kadav's sci-fi feature, *The Astronaut and His Purse*, starring Ali Fazal, and Megha Ramaswami's Short *Ladanna's Song* starring Parvathy Thiruvothu and Rima Kallingal.

Apart from a special screening of the award-winning cult horror film, *Tumbhad*, there will be panel discussions with Vishal Furia (*Chhorri, Lapachhapi*), Anvita Dutt (*Qala, Bulbbul*), Gauri Shinde, and Kaizad Gustad.

While the festival did have films like *My Dog is Sick* (directed by Bhavnani) and *Bodies Of Desire* (Varsha Panikar) last year, since it was mainly online, they did not publicise the BIWOC, LGBTQ+ Woman, and Non-Binary angle.

However, this time, besides having a diverse team - *Gaysti* Family has been roped in as their community outreach partner.

"This is super for any festival that is attempting to be inclusive - to have community outreach partners who share your commitment to diversity. A diverse selection committee is also crucial in curating films and stories," concludes Bhavnani. (IANS)

## Love Fancy Nails? Here's how to get them

Even though the visible part of our nails are just dead cells, we enjoy playing with them. We add a pop of colour to them, get nail extensions, lengthen our nails, and give them a trendy chic aesthetic. Who knew so much could be done in such a small space as our nails? Nails are also an important aspect of the fashion industry, with many spending hundreds of dollars to have their nails appear attractive and Instagram-worthy.

We frequently wonder why our nails break easily as they grow, or why they appear pale and fragile. The reason is simple: negligence. Yes! If you want to have elegant and healthy-looking nails, you must take care of them. Nail care is frequently underestimated as an important element of self-care. Maintaining your nails might help you avoid infections and other health issues. Also, as nails are a part of your visible appearance, keeping your nails in good condition can boost your image and make you feel more put together.

Furthermore, we spend so much on fancy nail treatments to make them look good. But regardless of how much money you spend on those sophisticated nail treatments, it is just as necessary to feed your nails with the correct nutrition as any other body part.

So, if you love fancy nails and nail art, you may want to consider incorporating biotin-rich foods into your diet to help avoid brittle and pale-looking nails. Biotin is a B vitamin that is important for maintaining healthy skin, hair, and nails. It encourages optimal cell growth and assists in the synthesis of protein-building amino acids, which are required for nail growth. Thus, we must consume foods that are high in biotin, as biotin makes nails stronger and prevents brittle nails.

Here are some biotin-rich foods that you may want to add to your diet. Eggs: We're all aware that eggs are a high-quality protein source. Those who work out, try to grow strong muscles, and even lose weight prefer eggs. Little did we know that eggs were a great source of biotin. In fact, there is 10 mcg of biotin in a big egg. Now, if you enjoy having elegant nails, you should think about including eggs in your diet.

Almonds: "Eating almonds is helpful for your

memory," we've all heard this expression at some point in our lives. Almonds are regarded as healthy since they are rich in proteins, fiber, and minerals. It is also a fantastic source of biotin and vitamin E, both of which are necessary for strong nails. Almonds have a biotin content of 1.5 mcg per ounce.

Sweet potatoes: Sweet potato is another wonderful food that is rich in biotin. Sweet potatoes make our winter days complete and are packed with nutrients such as vitamin A and fiber. One medium-sized sweet potato has roughly 2.4 mcg of biotin. Thus eating a delicious sweet potato dish is enough to supply biotin for your lovely nails.

Spinach: We Indians love saag recipes, and there is every reason to love them. Spinach is a green leafy vegetable that belongs to the saag family and has numerous nutritional qualities. Also, cooking spinach is simple, and the flavour is delicious. Spinach is a good source of biotin, as well as other nutrients like iron and vitamin C. One cup of raw spinach contains about 0.5 mcg of biotin.

Salmon: Next on the list is salmon fish, which, despite its fancy name, is widely available in any Indian fish market. Furthermore, salmon oil, which is generated from salmon fish, is well-known for its healthy fats and other benefits. This fish is also high in biotin and omega-3 fatty acids, all of which are beneficial to overall health. Biotin levels in a 3-ounce plate of salmon are around 5 mcg. A spoonful of salmon oil could provide you with numerous benefits for healthy skin, thicker hair, and stronger nails.

Avocado: Avocados are a good source of fiber, healthy fats, and biotin. A medium avocado has roughly 2 mcg of biotin in it. Thanks to the excellent fats in avocados, they allow the body to absorb vitamins and minerals more quickly, which are also required to deal with pale and weak nails.

A lot of skincare and hair products contain avocados since they're thought to give skin a healthier glow. In addition to these foods, you may also consider taking a biotin supplement to help promote healthy nails.

However, it's always best to talk to your doctor before starting any new supplements.

Adore your gorgeous nails without worrying about being brittle! (IANS/ije)



# The call of leadership

By DC PATHAK

In the age of information and digitisation, the paradigms that define a leader, the workforce and productivity stand altered and some vital requisites have particularly been added to the call of leadership.

The traditional 'leader-follower' equation or the 'boss-subordinate' relationship does not hold because the yardstick of leadership is not determined by the number of followers alone nor would a 'boss' command the respect even of the limited crowd of subordinates one led, unless he or she was also a 'leader'.

Working online and from home, brings in a new challenge of oversight and control being exercised from a remote end and pushes to a new level the importance of the 'emotional intelligence' of the leader - reputations could be made or marred by any perceptible 'flaw' in these spheres.

Equally important is the communication skill of the leader - the messaging has to have clarity, brevity and logical sequencing regardless of whether it was done verbally, telephonically or online.

The thought that all businesses or professional ventures are 'human activity', has been revaluated and the concept that the 'individual was the centre of all productivity' has been reinforced despite the rise of technology.

'Smart' working has received newfound importance since being smart means being able to produce more per unit of 'resource' - whether of money, manpower or machine - the exalted level of 'competition' in a fast-moving world, had made 'time' a new resource as well.

Performance evaluation and measure of 'productivity' were becoming relatively 'frier' or 'lower' well you were 'dressed for work', 'bound by office hours' and placed in the vertical hierarchy of the organisation.

A leader today has to have a 'comprehension' far greater than what one could do in earlier times and has to be far more effective than before in a situation of 'operational remoteness' and reduced 'visibility' forced by digitisation. At least five prerequisites of leadership have to be met for the latter's success.

The first is the ability to take knowledge-based decisions and to ensure that an unwarranted gap between 'decision' and 'action' did not result in failure of the project. With this, goes the competence about initiating a mid-course correction should this become unavoidable in the interest of the mission.

A successful leader has to have flawless communication - verbal, audio based or digital - since inadequate or faulty communication from the top can be the cause of failure too.

A leader has to be a well-informed person - being well-informed means having the right information at the right time, having the information that made a difference between a decision and a 'guess' and accessing 'complete looking' information since 'knowledge' came in 'integral packaging' all components of which had to be understood.

As an illustration, the CEO whose organisation employed women workers must in addition to his professional ability to manage the business, know that an adequate system had to be in place to prevent and look into any case of harassment of a woman at the workplace, as required by law. A good leader realises that 'though nobody knows everything, everybody knows something' about how the business was doing and makes arrangements to garner this tacit knowledge available within the organisation. This helps the leader to remain well-informed.

Successful corporate bodies establish a well-funded 'Intelligence and Analysis' unit to systematically collate and analyse information about the external environment - besides the internal feedback - to help knowledge-

based decision-making. This is also the reason why major players in a business participate in the intra-industry get-togethers and business conferences within the country and outside - this is an exercise to keep the leadership well-informed.

The second important trait of a successful leader is the capacity to 'distinguish essentials from non-essentials' or in other words to practice 'effectiveness of differentiation'.

Pareto's law famously said: "There are a significant few amongst the insignificant many". A leader should be able to see the difference between a major problem and a minor irritant, between the 'macro' and the 'micro', and between the long term and the short term, between the 'journey' and its destination and between the decision and its implementation.

Steve Jobs - founder of Apple - is said to have remarked: "Don't let something that does not matter cause you to lose something that does". Somewhere, the leader has to have the capacity to see things from their larger perspective - a bird's eye view helps to realise how something that looked 'big' in proximity became small in a comparative showing. Also, 'awareness' when 'complete' leads to 'acceptance' of what the reality was and allows for a stress free mind at the leadership level.

It is the remit of the leader to establish an environment of peace within the organisation so that everyone was able to work with concentration and enhance productivity - the relationship between 'concentration' and 'output' per unit of time is not difficult to fathom.

A leader while assessing a person who worked for him can see the relative value of 'brilliance' and 'hard work' and draw a line between an apparent 'dynamism' and the test of 'delivery'.

Being seemingly 'busy' is not the same as being productive. A healthy sense of discretion in the exercise of authority sets apart a leader of distinction from others in the pack.

Thirdly, a leader wields the power of 'authenticity' - not merely the strength that the chair provides - and this can be developed with a conscious effort.

A person at the top must remember that there was a 'leader' in him or her and that 'all leaders could manage but all managers could not lead'. Credulous people never look powerful. A leader must act only on reliable information - not taken in by gossip, live in integration with certain principles and values and function out of self-esteem, not ego. These qualities show up on their own.

The leadership of the organisation creates the right 'boss-subordinate' relationship down the line. The senior must provide natural supervision and allow the junior to express his opinion while retaining his right to overrule the latter with a logical explanation. A boss should not be short on listening and long on dictating.

A leader distinguishes the failure of 'result' from the failure of 'effort' and faults the 'act' of a subordinate without attacking the 'person' of the latter. A good leader is 'respected' more than he is 'feared'.

A fourth dimension of leadership is inevitably linked with the way the latter handles interactions within the organisation since - as already mentioned - all business is human activity. This traverses the entire range of situations from assembling the team to the perceptions about credit-sharing in the enterprise.

No two persons are equal in every respect and therefore leveraging individual strengths and remembering that a multicultural group can be a powerhouse of creativity, would be very useful while constituting a team.

A leader realises the importance of the 'power of relationship' that manifests itself when within the organisation members give and seek



legitimate help. Leadership must understand how emotions shaped the responses of any person - this will help a senior with the right EQ not to misread the doing of an employee who possibly could be under some stress caused by a situation in the family and to note the body language of the latter at the same time. The success of a leader lies in getting more from a team and retaining the organisational loyalty of the workforce.

Finally, the leaders today should not miss the trend that there is an evolution of management - particularly because of the COVID experience - whereby organisations were becoming flat needing a participative role of leaders, a downward shift of decision-making and a greater requirement for the seniors to know their men closely. Vertical intervention is a means of creating a grid for maximising production. Bosses can not afford to be aloof in exercising control of the operations as they had to be ready to provide guidance to any team member who would ask for it.

The world economic and geopolitical scene was prone to quick changes and the leaders were required to take responsibility upfront for course correction, monitoring of demand and supply and the fixing up of the supply chain both within the country as well as globally.

The strategy of undertaking re-skilling or upskilling programmes, promoting multi-tasking and framing a flexible policy for a Hybrid Work Environ (HWE) - all need the direct involvement of the leadership at the top.

Leaders have to be confident of themselves - there is a saying that 'courage is a love affair with the unknown'. Perhaps they should remember also that doing the right thing is always the right thing.

Above all, today's leader has to develop a new level of identification with the workers since in a situation of dispersal, the importance of the individual becoming the anchor of productivity beyond technology, had shown up on a stronger note. (The writer is a former Director of the Intelligence Bureau.)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambal Sunday, MARCH 19, 2023

**Birthday Forecasts**

Moon time Mars or your solar return chart and you will feel satisfaction in doing things that you like. You will have new windows of opportunity which you will greet with enthusiasm. You will be able to do things you will be a star in your heart and will help lots of people. You will be having money gains. You will do well in your profession. Thus you will be proud in your family. You will keep making progress in your business. Your partner will fully support you and you will have perfect understanding with him/her. There will be peaceful atmosphere at home. Secret enemies will get exposed. The time is for spending wisely. You will keep entering and with numerous persons. It will prove to be fruitful. Your knowledge will grow. You will have lot of fame and name. You will plan to buy a house or vehicle.

**This week for you!**

**Aries : (March 21 - April 20)** will be a fantastic week. You will have an important news which will cheer you up. You will find a relative of yours. You will also have some inevitable incidents which you will remember for a long time to come. You will avoid clash of interests with your colleagues. Just need to put your ego aside. Some high official will come to be a source of strength for you. You also need to be careful in financial dealings. You will get press job or position in some society, organization or club. You will have lot of fame and name. The works in your hand will be completed with success. You will have a wonderful love life. New romantic relationship with a person known to you is probable.

**Taurus : (April 21 - May 21)** You will have mental satisfaction this week. You will be a lot more happy as your work gets fulfilled. You will have monetary gains. A short distance business to level is also indicated. Your income will increase. You will see a person known in your job, business and profession. Your bosses will be happy with you. You will be positive about your future. You may face some tense situations in your home affairs. But you will solve it with patience and forgiveness. You will show a different side of your personality. You will be humble and polite. You will also live love among your loved ones. Students will get success in their interview. There will be some auspicious event taking place in the beginning.

**Gemini : (May 22 - June 21)** The beginning of the week will give fabulous results. All the work will speed up. You will be able to impress people with your communication skills. Your business activities will also pick up. You will buy new household items. You will have money in your hands. You will do a work with a sense of purpose. You behaved will be generous and gentle. You will get a chance to be promoted in your job or progress in your work. You will also be busy in the activities which interest you most. Your work capacity will also increase. You will be much loved by all and all. You will do some good to your partner. You will improve your home also.

**Cancer : (June 22 - July 22)** There will be a lot of money giving days. You will earn well in your job/profession. You will have tremendous self belief and confidence in your own abilities. Those who are single will get marriage proposals. Whatever planning you have in mind you will be able to achieve it. Some unforeseen situation may trouble you but you will take things as they come. You may lose your love life in business if you are less. You will spend time with your own people. You will be happy in the company of your friends. Don't deny any one with your words. Take care of your health. Otherwise luck is favoring you.

**Leo : (July 23 - August 23)** This week is going to be full of activities and gains. You will be satisfied with your work and could be promoted in your job. You will get money for your partner's needs. It will come at a nighttime when you needed it most. You will feel easy in your work. You will see a lot of friends of activities in various spheres. You will enjoy a wonderful love life. There will be sweetness in marital relations. You will get encouragement from your relatives. Your elders will bless you. You will buy new electronic goods for the social use. You will aim to achieve your goals. Some of you, who are sports get for exams and interviews will get success. You will encourage your colleagues.

**Virgo : (August 24 - September 23)** This time will be best. New business proposals will come. The time is for partying. You will have lot of fun and entertainment. You will celebrate your success in life with your family members. Success awaits you. You will clear some competitive exams or interviews. You will enjoy new job, new place and will adjust to it very well. There will be loveable job for you. You will get some ideas to work in big organizations. You will also come in contact with lot of influential persons. You will move towards success and progress.

**Libra : (September 23 - October 23)** You will have all round growth and development. You will give gains in business/profession. Your efforts will be met with success. You will be clear and honest in your dealings with people. You will be successful. You will get additional responsibility in your job/profession. Your talent will get highlighted and recognized. You will do charity work and spend. You will do good deeds. Philosophers, media persons and students will have the chance to do something new. They need nothing to prove to anyone. Your power will be stronger.

**Scorpio : (October 24 - November 23)** This week will see growth in your fortunes. You will make a big in job and business. You will have no shortage of funds. You will also be in the search phase of mind as a result of which you will travel in some foreign places. There is a chance of change of place of work. Take care of your health. You will be able to establish your dominance at the workplace. Your work will gather momentum. By adopting new methods in business you will earn money. You will remain close to your partner and will have great understanding. You will also solve your domestic problem with cool mind.

**Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21)** The time is to study, practice and relax. You will be busy with your family. You will have gains in business/profession. There will be love and bonding among the family members. Your expenses will rise but you need to keep a check on it. However, your income will rise and you will have no shortage of funds. You will get the best has links on offer. You will get a good news from somewhere. You will attend a birthday/marriage function. You will get practical and gain bit of knowledge as you may get a chance to meet an enlightened person financially who will be prosperous.

**Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20)** It will be a wonderful week. You will be able to turn your dreams into reality. New job/business offers will come to you. Favorable placement of Jupiter will open the door of your luck. You will have blessings of your senior and aged also. You will plan to change your job too. You will also get a court order in your favor. You will love to be and will meet lot of people. There will be a great sense of urgency as you to finish your work. Students will get results as per their expectations. You will resolve property related matters. Enemies won't be able to harm you. You will be good at getting your work done. You will be master of your own destiny.

**Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18)** This time will be fruitful. You will make good progress in business and job. You will have increase in income. Your earnings will grow. Thus you will have prosperity, peace and happiness in your life. You will experience warmth and bonding in family relations. Husband and wife will have wonderful bonding. You will be job oriented. You will continue your course at the workplace for good. You will buy expensive clothes. Thus you will be spending liberally. You will get news that will be a big factor in your growth. Don't try to balance two separate things simultaneously, be it in your work place or personal life. In a short period of time.

**Pisces : (February 19 - March 20)** This is going to be a fantastic week for you. You will be meeting prominent people from different social circles. You will contribute to their advice and guidance. You will also find all your important work. You will also get new job/business offers. You will have the support of your friends and family members. Students will get success in exams. You will have sweetness in your marital relations. You will have progress in business. Your profits will increase. Ongoing business disputes with your competitors will get resolved. Some of you may also enter into new love relations leading to marriage.

## How international law can protect environmental disaster migrants

Researchers have tried for decades to find a relevant legal status for people forced to flee their homes as a result of floods, droughts and storms - calamities which climate change promises to make more severe and commonplace - as well as appropriate laws which might ensure their protection. But climate migrants are sometimes forgotten among the various folds of people seeking asylum.

To protect climate migrants who were forced to leave their country, some legal scholars have proposed amending the definition of refugees in the Refugee Convention of 1951 to consider environmental degradation a form of persecution. This would expand eligibility for asylum as a refugee under international law beyond the existing grounds of persecution by religion, race, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions.

But the principle of non-refoulement, mentioned in the refugee convention, already prohibits a host country of returning asylum seekers to somewhere they would face a real risk of persecution. This could be interpreted as guaranteeing access to an environment offering decent air and clean water according to the European Environment Agency.

Despite this provision, international law is failing to protect climate migrants, which means that the scope of the refugee convention, however broad, must be widened.

Ianne Teitonia is a citizen of Kiribati, an island nation in the central Pacific Ocean. In 2015, he was denied asylum in New Zealand after floods forced him to flee with his family. He protested to the UN Human Rights Committee, which ruled that his situation did not constitute an imminent risk to life.

The legal right of the people of Kiribati to seek effective protection from saltwater intruding into farmland, coastal erosion and crop failures as a result of sea-level rise does not exist. New Zealand maintained that it could only reward refugee status to people if the state had failed to respect their fundamental human rights. The effects of climate change are systemic, the argument goes, rather than a personal persecution against Teitonia himself.

Nevertheless, the Human Rights Committee said that people who fled their country because of the effects of climate change can argue that their experiences amount to persecution and seek refugee status under the refugee convention. Vulnerable people could also claim that climate change threatens their right to life under the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. This includes situations where environmental disasters are interlaced with conflict, leading to water or air being contaminated by chemical weapons.

States might consider asylum claims resulting from climate disasters in the future. But until consensus is reached among scholars or jurists about the legal status of climate migrants, they will probably avoid introduc-



ing a broad interpretation of what constitutes a climate migrant into international law.

Environmental disasters are unpredictable and the damage they cause can heighten a territory for years, taking decades for people to properly recover. The people displaced may need to seek shelter in another country or region while the reconstruction is underway.

Climate change will cause an increasing number of disasters such as floods, droughts and wildfires. Legal solutions, especially in the case of climate change disasters, will be difficult to predict in advance. A firm understanding of what works where climate migrants are forced to settle will be invaluable.

States neighbouring vulnerable countries are more likely to be affected by inflows of climate migrants. By shouldering a disproportionate share of this responsibility, these countries will keep the impassable over the legal status of climate migrants alive on the international stage and have an outside role in constructing an international consensus around their legal status.

As these countries attempt to acquire funding and build shelters to house migrants, they'll also be dealing with a rising number of asylum claims. This will inevitably prompt research within the country to determine the most relevant legal status climate migrants need to guarantee their protection. This could attract international recognition as climate change and the entwined refugee crisis escalate.

There was a dramatic spike in 2015 in the number of migrants fleeing war and famine, especially in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Eritrea and migration policy remains a very sensitive and divisive topic of debate as a result.

Preparing the efficient protection of climate refugees is a challenge for the years to come. But in the meantime, people need help. The recent earthquake in Turkey and Syria caused several thousand deaths, but may have left millions without homes.

Only the creation of an efficient international framework of laws can guarantee refugee for people fleeing such environmental disasters in future. Building that outcome is likely to begin in the countries nearest to the suffering. (The Conversation)

"A nation is a society united by a delusion about its ancestry and by common hatred of its neighbours."

—William Inge

The Shillong Times

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Of irresponsible speech-making

IN politics one cannot be foolproof and fancy free. Every comment made by leading politicians is weighed against the prevailing situation and the larger repercussions of what such statements might have. Across the political spectrum there is much loose talk - from dragging names of former prime ministers through the mud to utterances that are intimidatory in nature and are intended to incite violence. This is the nature of politics in India and it is only getting more crass by the day. Sadly politicians tend to get away with their irresponsible statements, that is only until Sunday when the police went knocking at the doors of top Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. The police want Rahul to validate his statement made during the Bharat Jodo Yatra in Kashmir in January this year that women are still being sexually assaulted. In a state like Kashmir or Nagaland/Manipur etc., where the security forces have been known to violate the human rights of citizens, especially women, such statements cannot be said to be sacreligious.

Under the prevailing circumstances this act by the Delhi Police was quickly interpreted as one of vendetta against the principal opposition and another of the Modi government's 'anti-democratic' acts. Coming to the crux of the matter, what the police sought from the Congress leader was evidence to support his widely reported statement in Srinagar that "women are still being sexually assaulted (in the Valley)". The police ostensibly sought to know from Rahul Gandhi where he got such information and who those victims are. Politicians make statements not out of empathy but to win votes. Such a statement in the Kashmir valley is aimed at reinstating the Congress as a Party with empathy for Muslims. But following the revocation of Article 370 there have been more attacks on Kashmiri pandits and largely male members. Hence Rahul Gandhi's statements seem misdirected.

Rahul Gandhi's reported reply to the police is that he said many things during the Bharat Yatra, all of which he could not recollect. In a state like Kashmir where militancy is induced by agent provocateurs from across the border, politicians are expected to be more circumspect and not to seek to score political brownie points at the first opportunity. In India we seem to have reached a point of political desperation which sets off political opponents to make statements they later seem to have no explanation for. Political discipline across the political divide is imperative. Sadly, political rivals are seen as bitter enemies deserving no respect whatsoever. This is exacerbated by the fact that even the illiterate with no control over their thoughts and utterances sit and legislate over the collective future of the nation and its citizens. Clearly a line needs to be drawn on how far to take political speech-making without intruding into the domain of national security.

Letters to the Editor

Rahul Gandhi scripts the Congress downfall

The special article, "Analysing the Congress and its revival prospects" (ST 10th March) by Patricia Mukhim is insightful. The downfall of the oldest party has been well reasoned out. Very true that Rahul Gandhi has lost his charisma, as pointed out by the writer. Though Rahul Gandhi completely lacks leadership qualities and intellectual bandwidth may try hard to project him as the future Prime Minister of the country. This is totally absurd. Sachin Pilbi or Shashi Tharoor can be far better choices. One can't understand what makes so many columnists heap praise on Rahul's "Bharat Jodo Yatra", as if the "odyssey would be a magic wand" to revive the party. This has instead become a tragic wand to bring the party further down. Just look at the shameful debacle in Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura.

Rahul Gandhi has recently courted controversy in a foreign land. The thoughtless statements blurted out in England has made people doubt his diplomatic acumen. As a public leader, one should choose his/her words with utmost tactfulness, particularly when he/she addresses audiences outside the country. Rahul thoughtlessly pattered and tarnished the image of the nation. This also exposed his ineptitude and crassness. Can one's family members speak ill of their parents/ancestors with their neighbours? Of course, only people with some pathological ailment can do that. On the other hand, such reckless rants by a leader have the potential to provoke subversive forces within the country. It ultimately goes to pose a threat to the integrity of the nation. It is no less outrageous that the former Chief Minister of Meghalaya (Late) J.D. Rymbai was called to Delhi by Sonia Gandhi and was told to step down, which he dutifully obeyed and made way for Mr. B.D. Lopang. Late Rymbai's only fault was that he did not grant NOK's as mentioned by Ms Mukhim. Is the High Command's whim more important than the environment of Meghalaya? Is being an upright leader a cause of worry for the Congress party? What really was cooking behind

Students' Politics in the Hynniewtrep Land: From 1908 to 1978

By Kyrsoibor Pnyuh

On the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) I would like to briefly present the historical accounts of students' engagements in the socio-political life of Hynniewtrep since the 19th Century AD. Such engagements have produced students who later became writers, thinkers and exemplary community leaders. Despite several odds, the Khasi students had increasingly become assertive from the early part of the 19th century. In March 1908, the Khasi students, under the leadership of Babu Dohroy Ropmay and Chandu Naih Roy, came together as a collective to question the new rules imposed on the students by the Calcutta University. The meeting was convened on March 8, 1908 in Shillong Government High School Hall to deliberate on the matter. Amongst others who spoke, Rev J.C. Evans, while expressing concern at the petty and thin attendance at the meeting, unequivocally stated that the new rules of the University would put the Khasi students at a disadvantage and hamper the future growth of education in these hills for the following reasons - (i) the new rules would do away with fixed courses in English and in effect gave the University the liberty to frame questions from any English book or chapter for the Entrance and J.A. examinations. This would mean that students should have an in-depth knowledge of English so as to compete in the examinations which was difficult for any Khasi student then; (ii) the Khasi vernacular was withdrawn as a subject and this meant that the Khasi students must write their composition in English and not in their own language. This would become a major handicap for Khasi students as majority of them were first generation learners and had just begun to grasp the multi facets of the English language; (iii) as the Khasi vernacular would no longer be a compulsory subject, the students would have to opt for Bengali or Assamese, while the Latin language remained as difficult as before. All these factors would adversely impact the Khasi students and make it difficult for them to even clear the University entrance examinations. Hence the students' collective resolved to petition the authority and seek redress. Consequently, the petition was submitted to the Chief Secretary to the Government of E.B. & Assam Shillong, on June 24 1908. (U. Nonglialam Khristian March 1908)

When India attained Independence in 1947, there was intense political wrangling in the region and there were sharp divisions of opinions between the major warring political groups, viz. the Federation of Khasi States, the conglomerate of Khasi States which acceded to Dominion of India via the Instrument of Accession and the Khasi Jaintia Federated State National Conference which opposed the formalisation of the Sixth Schedule. The latter prevailed in the Constituent Assembly and Khasi States were relegated to the Sixth Schedule. The Khasi students' community have carved their own space in the political landscape of the region. During the inauguration of the United Khasi & Jaintia Autonomous Districts on June 1952, simultaneously the students organized the first ever Black Flag demonstration against the idea of District Councils and the nomination of six members to the Council. Thereafter, the Khasi Students Association (KSA) was founded in 1955 with the objectives of

imbibing the spirit of solidarity amongst students and to promote education, learning, morality and to uplift the socio-economic well-being of the Nation (Constitution of Khasi Students Association 1955).

The KSA elected H.O. Mawrie and Bhiren Singh Thanghiew as its first President and General Secretary respectively, but it also included women like Elizabeth Mauser, Perlimai Syiem and Maanor Sylvia Lyngdoh in its central leadership. In its 20th year journey until the last election in 1975, the KSA will be remembered as the students' collective which took great interest in the intellectual, moral and physical development of the students. (Proceedings of KSA)

What underscores the Khasi Students Union (KSU) since its formation in 1978 is the identity politics and the three tier council system that the Union had developed with the Central Executive Council, the apex body, the General Executive Council and General Council way down the hierarchy. The KSU is being criticized for its extension and over the years it has organized units in colleges, university and residential localities through which it reaches its plans and programs to the people.

Today, there is a sharp inequality amongst tribals. The rich tribal elite is at the helm of affairs and the politico-bureaucratic business nexus is so entrenched that all our land and resources will soon be sold to the highest bidder (s) who come from far away lands.

The KSU must also address the issue of the participation of girl students in the central leadership of the Union. In the paper entitled, 'Role of Women in Student Movements in Meghalaya (1995)', R. Borphan and E. Laifang pungently remarked, "... however the KSU has made certain concessions to female members by inserting the word 'she' in Article 7 of the amended constitution in 1993 which says 'to be eligible to hold an office in Central Executive Council she should be...'. However, the provision enabling women to play a more effective role is in cold storage... there is an opinion that these change parties are continuing with their women, but to enable certain groups to mobilize women supporters."

As a paring shot I would like to say that the KSU leadership must ensure that student politics is not hijacked by the far-right groups (s).

Sri Lanka and Bangladesh as well as Pakistan which today are in dire economic circumstances.

Just last week two banks had to be declared insolvent in the USA and six banks are under watch. Recession had already started in other parts of the world and India has to be more careful. But it is a pity to note that regional parties are continuing with their freebie distribution schemes. The present schemes run by the central government are meant for social objectives such as Aashram Bharat scheme, ODF, free housing, free gas cylinders, Kiranayana etc. Such schemes are meant to assist the poorest and are different from freebies.

In the ultimate analysis we can conclude that the regional parties run by family members don't actually care about the rural financial position of the state and are only focused on vote bank politics. Look at the central government for a bail-out package. Yours etc, Yash Pal Raihan, 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.

Functioning of parliament under threat from ruling party

PM's hurt ego at the root of BJP demand for Rahul's apology

By Arun Srivastava

Home minister Amit Shah's scolding of Congress on March 17 that Rahul Gandhi must apologise for his UK remarks before he can be allowed to defend them in Parliament, is like confessing the crime which the person has not committed at all. After maintaining a passive silence for more than a week, Shah coming out with this condition, certainly makes it abundantly clear that Narendra Modi is determined to confront the Congress and other opposition parties.

Modi claims to respect democracy and parliamentary practices. If one subscribes to his claim, what deters him from not creating his MP's and colleagues to refrain from creating chaos in Parliament. This is the first time in the history of Independent India that the ruling party has been stalling the functioning of Parliament. People are not sure to read the implications. It is a known fact, according to practice and procedures of parliament that only a government which is in a moral power resorts to such gimmicks. Modi must not live in a fool's paradise that people of the country endorse the BJP members actions.

On Thursday Rahul Gandhi met Speaker Om Birla and sought an opportunity to explain his remarks in Parliament. It is incongruous to understand why he was not permitted. This simply added strength to the assertion that democracy was not functioning. Later Rahul said in the house: "So, if Indian democracy was functioning, I would be able to say my piece in Parliament." At the conclave Shah said that the Parliament standstill had been resolved if the Opposition comes forward to hold talks with the government. But in the same breath he put the onus on Rahul for resolving the stalemate.

One would certainly like to know what prevented him from taking the initiative and convey to the Speaker, the government's willingness to listen to his clarification. One thing is clear, besides making his remarks an election issue, Modi has made it a personal issue and his hurt ego will be assuaged only after Rahul apologises. This is certainly not acceptable. With Rahul apologising and the Modi troupe unwilling to move two steps backwards, the stalemate would continue. Being leader of the house is the moral responsibility of Modi to initiate the process to break the impasse. He must realise that his personal ego is not above the nation's interest. This will simply impair Modi's image. People will come to muse the belief that in order to conceal his failure, Modi was resorting to such tactics and even not allowing Parliament to function.

Shah's statement at the conclave is ambiguous. "Whether we are adamant or not is not the question since you are not the Speaker. What I'm saying is, let the two parties (government and Opposition) sit before the Speaker. Let them (Opposition) move two steps forward and we also move two steps forward and the standoff can be resolved". If he is really interested that people must not form wrong images and impression about Modi and his government, he must break the ice instead of letting it remain an ego problem.

With nothing to offer to Indians in terms of economic development and growth, BJP has only one agenda: "nationalism under threat". How long will Modi and Shah would exploit the emotion and psyche of the people by using this phrase? This is certainly not an idiom which could be used in posterity. This is simply a political phrase. As the people forget "indira india, indira is indira" within a couple of years of floating of the slogan,

the people will also forget "nationalism under threat". In fact, it is already losing its evidence was recently evident in recent assembly election which BJP lost, notwithstanding Shah's claim that Siddaram Kesarji said it was not only Congress but also BJP had not committed at all. Even a court of law listens to the accused before awarding the verdict. But in Rahul's case it is really intriguing why Modi and Shah are adamant that he should apologise first before coming out with his version on the floor of the house. This reminds of one political phrase: "Khatanabahi, jo kabe Kesar wahi sab" (do not need for document, what he says is correct). In Rahul's case they intend to say it is their word that is law and nothing is above it, so Rahul has to accept it. In case Rahul musters courage to defy this de jure verdict, he must be ready for intervention not only from Lok Sabha but also from the country, one the ground of being anti-national. The BJP's troll group is already on the task. While the house is filing breach of privilege the other is for announcement of his Lok Sabha membership. This nonchalance points to the sycophancy acquiring the character of institution in the BJP. They have come to realise that this is the passport to continue to enjoy the limelight. The remarks of Union Law Minister Kiren Rijji: "Rahul has to apologise in Parliament and it is our duty to seek his apology," provides an indication to the fact that the ministers have not only agreed to seek apology and for this they can go to any lengths. A speculation is making the rounds that the BJP may like to have the house dissolved and seek a fresh mandate. The primary agenda would be seeking apology from Rahul and his action. Rijji said anti-India forces and they were speaking in the same language. "The gang members speak the language used by Rahul Gandhi". In his past years they are not even willing to abide by parliamentary practices. Leader of opposition in Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge, said the BJP has honoured tradition of the Rajya Sabha that prohibits allegations against a member of the other House. He had also cited a precedent from June 19, 1967, when V.V. Giri said: "I would like to add that it would be a good rule to observe that members of one House should not use the freedom of speech on the floor of the House to make allegations or charges against members of the other House." It is learnt that Rajya Sabha chairman has asked the Rajya Sabha leader, BJP's Piyush Goyal, to have a look at his statement wherein he had accused Rahul, but on his part did not react. Trinamool MP Mahabir Prasad has hit out at Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla, accusing him of not allowing opposition members to speak in the House, twice. "Last 3 days, speaker (Om Birla) allows only ONLY BJP ministers to speak on mike & then adjourns parliament without a single opposition member being allowed to speak. Democracy is under attack. And the speaker leads from the front, in government, go to jail for twice". She was correct in saying that the BJP top guys are using the Speaker and the Rajya Sabha vice-chairman to stifle opposition in Parliament. The functioning of Parliament is under threat from the ruling government. It is itself, but by opposition. (IPA Service)

this High Command's order. That is very true indeed. Despite the repeated assurances of Rahul Gandhi, the weight of sycophancy is still so heavy in the Congress. Hope everyone agrees that with such thoughtless speech and action of Rahul Gandhi, the party's ship is sinking further and further down.

Yours etc, Sali Gwalri, Shillong

SC's observations on family run political parties

The arguments in the Constitution bench of the Supreme Court vis a vis the two factions of the Shiv Sena were completed and the decision is reserved for final ruling. Without going into the merits of the case I would like to mention here the comments made by Justice P.S. Narasimha. It is remarked that such an argument could sometimes be dangerous considering there are many regional parties that are run by one family; and there is absolutely no freedom in the party except for the leader. Justice Narasimha said that there is no scope for anyone else to come into the frame

\*With awareness come responsibility and choice.\*

— Amanda Lindhout  
The Shillong Times

**Pandemonium over Hindi**

MONDAY saw MLAs of the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) walk out of the Assembly while the Governor was reading out the customary address which encapsulates the policy statement of the Government and as such is drafted by the Government. The Governor's address also contains a review of the activities and achievements of the Government in the previous year and their policy outlines on critical issues that need to be addressed in the year ahead. It also includes the programme of Government Business for the current Assembly session. It is therefore an important statement which all legislators, particularly those in the Opposition need to pay attention to because their duty is to keep the government under check. Hence the Governor's address foregrounds the points of debate in the House. If the address is in a language that the majority of legislators in the House cannot comprehend then the very purpose of the legislature is defeated.

In the present House, only Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma is well conversant with Hindi. He engages with the powers that are in Delhi in fluent Hindi. The CM has the benefit of having studied in the national capital in his formative years but not all have that good fortune. Those who have studied in Meghalaya also learn Hindi but only as a third language after the vernacular and English and only up to Class 10. Hence their ability to understand the nuances of the language is limited. To engage constructively in a language one does not understand is a tall order. While the previous governor Satya Pal Malik was also comfortable with Hindi he made it a point to speak in English with those that find it difficult to understand Hindi. In any case it is basic courtesy to speak to someone in a language that the person understands or to do so through an interpreter. And herein lies the nub! The Meghalaya Legislative Assembly is not equipped with a simultaneous translating facility. Had this facility been available then legislators would have been able to speak in their native languages and express themselves better.

There is a point to be made about English and why it scores over Hindi. It is one of the most commonly spoken languages in the world and it opens up avenues not just within the country but in every part of the world. It is the language of science, computers, diplomacy, tourism etc. English is the official language of 53 countries and is used as a lingua franca (a mutually known language) by people from all around the world. English is also the language of the media industry. Hence to privilege Hindi above English is to limit the scope for job opportunities. The debate should end here and the Assembly had better acquire translation facilities at the earliest and end the brouhaha over the use of Hindi in the Assembly.

**Letters to the Editor**

**Yes Mister Secretary**

Editor,  
There is no point in reopening the debate or discussion on the official status of Hindi as the official language in India. More than enough to fill a few dozen libraries has been written on the subject. The fact however remains that many states in the country with their millions of inhabitants do not speak the language and are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with Hindi. Notwithstanding the wishful thinking of the Sangh Parivar that it should be otherwise, this is the political status of Hindi in India. The language is spoken mainly in the Indo-Gangetic cow belt states that trying to ram Hindi down the throats of non Hindi speaking minority communities and states is an entirely different matter. It crosses the limits of political gimmickry and instead stands out as a sore thumb of a society that has no respect nor consideration for the sentiments of other minority societies. In a single word it stands out as uncouth loudness.  
On the operating days of the Budget Session of MDA 02, ie the March 20, 2023, the Governor chose to address

the August House of the Legislative Assembly in Hindi. Some MLAs, obviously for whom Hindi is as equivalent as Greek, walked out as a sign of protest. Good for them! One is given to believe that the Chief Minister then tried to defend this action of the Governor by stating that it's because of his Excellency's limitations in terms of fluency of being able to speak or read. In simple language, English deficiency is the guy's forte! But no problem there as it's the sort of political theatrics followed by the usual incompetent explanations that all Indians are being acclimatised to.

One is worried however about other more serious issues that political dramatists. My worry stems from a fact of the existence of a Head of State who is unacquainted with the English language in a state where English is the official language. My perplexity rapidly becomes acute worry when I turn to Art 153 - Art 162 of the Constitution of India. All bills of the State Government and those of the Autonomous District Councils have to attain the approval of the Governor. But then all official correspondence between Raj Bhawan and these premier institutions of governance are in English. Can someone

When North East Network (NEN) were perhaps among the few, maybe first, in Shillong to organise celebrations around March 8, back in that progressive era there were enough reasons to celebrate and truly honourable women in honour - the likes of Sylvester Sweet, Queenie Rynjah and Sitmon Sawian. Evolved and broad-minded women of substance, unflinching courage, impeccable integrity and high social morality. In those days it wasn't simply about achievements but what people stood for and embodied. It was such a privilege therefore to have these stalwarts grace our little function. Over the years as the events around the International Women's Day have expanded manifold, my own celebration of the day has retreated into the private domain and has primarily been a quiet evening of sharing a drink or two and uncensored conversations with friends. This year however there was a real reason to come together to celebrate. To celebrate the three persons - two women and a man from the KAM Meghalaya platform who fought the Assembly elections and lost. We supporters and well-wishers gathered together in solidarity to salute their meritorious courage, integrity and resilience and mark Women's Day in a deeply significant way.

The more I reflect on what the KAM Meghalaya platform set out to do and the various patriarchal and societal structures that they attempted to transgress I am astounded and realise what an audacious attempt it was in a deeply conservative society like Shillong with its different levels of prejudices and mindsets. The first perhaps was the tenacity of two women and a rebel pastor to venture into the world of money, muscle flexing, misogyny and operating without backing by the elected members, or a dominant party, or a local heavyweight pressure group or a religious institution and then put forth a different narrative about electorocracy and power sharing! A narrative wherein the citizen and the rights and dignity of the citizen was the central focus and the patronised hierarchy of the 'ruler' and the 'voiceless ruled' was questioned and upturned. Then again a non-negotiable position on gender justice regardless of whoever the perpetrators were. For instance, why on earth should they have had loud and clear voices against the release of the Bilibis rapists and murderers when women politicians of the ruling dispensation and its allies themselves maintained

in their daily lives with no thought given at all to the inconvenience of others. The situation will only get worse with no action being taken by the government. The Traffic Department appears to be quite inactive as about two years ago they had requested the undersigned for some tips to ease the congestion and these tips were given to the department a couple of times but no action was ever taken till date. The tips given will not solve the city's traffic problem but will help to ease the congestion to some extent in some areas. This traffic jam problem has to be taken seriously and has to be tackled on a day footing and unless it is done so, the common people will continue to suffer. Let us insist that the new government gives this problem the attention that it deserves.  
Yours etc.,  
D.M. Panat,  
Via email

**Shillong's traffic snarl**

Editor,  
I fully endorse Jennifer Dikhar's write up of March 17, 2023 regarding road rage and traffic jams in our city. The way we drive our vehicles on the road has no influence on the way we live our lives with people becoming aggressive and selfish

**A post praterem and a sautation**

By Roshmi Goswami

a demure silence? And to top it all they came in with no funds to distribute or party and had to rely on crowd funding for their basic expenses. In this course they were not alone for the VPP resorted to crowd funding as well which is nothing new in the world of civil society and has also been followed by different candidates in Assam and other places during the last Lok Sabha elections. For both groups of contestants it was of course a political statement worthy of greater attention and appreciation that elections can be and should be fought without the squandering of huge resources even by a well-oiled party with access to easy and convenient means.

But the more disturbing factor was perhaps their open and clear stand on a range of issues many of which were uncomfortable and an affront to the delicate sensibilities of Shillong. To mention the delicate sensibilities was first of all the unspoken issue of class - surprisingly hugely problematic for the so-called capitalist tribal elites of Shillong society. The fact that one of the contestants was a former domestic worker and headed the domestic workers forum was received with an undercurrent of disdain. Then their uncompromising secular and non-communal position which they pushed and unequivocally declared standing firmly with different communities and religious groups. They were in fact cautioned about being too vocal about their social stand for these stands are at best to be confined only to closed WhatsApp groups!

The real test was their commitment to human rights and humanity rather than the much revered jathibeyri and their scandalous support for the LGBTQ community and their rights. When I was profoundly struck by was the underlying beliefs that so firmly anchored these non-negotiable positions on rights and humanity. As deeply believing and spiritually secure Christians (with no need for any public display of their faith) that unequivocal stand against today's dominant politics of hate and exclusion was driven by their unshakeable belief and commitment to the tenets of 'love' which is the very foundation of their religion. At no given point would these be ever hatched off no matter what the lures or arguments are.  
For me what was also especially telling was the economic divide and push back on that. The KAM

Meghalaya contestants are well known for their years of work for the urban poor and the unorganised sector having always stood solidly behind all categories of workers including migrant workers, domestic workers, street hawkers and vendors. And therein lies a catch for the most preliminary of discussions on congestion in Shillong city immediately zeroes in to the street hawkers even by the most avowed social activists! Nobody talks about the number of cycles on the streets, of the number of cars that each family has and uses and the fact that very few people in Shillong own a car, let alone a two-wheeler. Many reasons are cited for this, of course, although I think despite all limitations and obstacles the street hawkers themselves should be able to explain to me that if street hawkers are the primary reason for congestion then why is it such a pleasure to drive through Shillong when schools are closed? Wonder if street hawkers go on holiday too? Or do they park their cycles elsewhere and has to be tackled from that perspective. I believe it is being initiated but these arguments throw deep despair about the urban and the eternal divides of 'them' and 'us'.

On the contrary amongst the street hawkers themselves, the problem lies not in devices of caste, ethnicity or religion. Their conditions and economic status unites and gives them a different perspective of coexistence with the rest of the middle class of Shillong. The KAM Meghalaya contestants have enabled that invaluable sense of solidarity. Wandering off into the rural areas and drawing a simplistic notion of village life and rural poverty can be somewhat attractive to the majority on the other hand is more challenging because it is about shared spaces, stares you in the face and pushes you to negotiate positions on rights and humanity. Working and dealing with the sex workers of Sonagachi, Kolkata many years ago compelled me to confront my own biases and taught me invaluable lessons on humility. A deep connection with the association of street hawkers then immediately put the KAM contestants in the suspicious category of the 'other'! And so they lost - weighed down by the heaviness of their values and positions and because they were in the suspicious category as Milan Kundera asks, 'is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid?'

One kind of man will risk nothing, another wants risks. Either way one is making a sacrifice. It is the higher ones that are more likely to be respected, loved and misinterpreted. We need this attitude; it was long overdue. I'm only sad that many others did not see outside with him, because I'm sure most of them didn't understand a word that was being said, but thought that they were doing the decent thing, that every common person and anyone is capable of.  
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Gregory Shullai,  
Via email

Doesn't heaviness bring you closer to that which is truthful and real while lightness afar a while becomes insignificant? Perhaps many years from now the value of KAM Meghalaya's weight will finally be comprehended and lauded. For now as Shillong flies high on the 'lightness of being' just a handful of discerning minds will understand the full import of this extremely courageous attempt. A truly watershed moment in the history or her/his of feminism mobilising in NE India. A moment to be treasured.

As the eternal cynic I did not have any delusions of the possibility of the stereotypical notion of success of a value based platform. The response to the victory of the two women candidates in neighbouring Nagaland has undoubtedly been euphoric. Nagawomen, at least a few of them have fought a long, bitter and difficult fight to arrive at that moment and one can momentarily put aside party affiliations, ideological concerns, and share that joy. But as a feminist it is difficult to break aside some more disturbing questions that arise immediately at this point. If women's political participation is not simply about representation at the level of advice. A repeated word of agency that one kept hearing in Shillong about KAM Meghalaya is that the candidates should have just tried to join one of the 'strong' parties! But that is precisely the point. Can 'strong' women in 'strong parties' retreat back into patriarchal gags or can only pursue that which is 'allowed' of them by the patriarchy. In the last time when the candidates were in the political arena in the country has been unprecedented and continues to rise accompanied by a gagging, shackling patriarchy and feudal paternalism that advances like galloping cancer. Yet through the KAM Meghalaya experience plus the way the recently held elections in NE India played out the feudal paternalism and the hierarchy of the 'ruler' and 'the ruled' is what people male or female, want - he is the electorate or the politicians themselves. A longing to be blessed by the patriarchal 'rule'.

If more powerful and seasoned politicians have willingly acquiesced to this then could we face the two women in Nagaland if they are limited in what they can actually achieve? That not one I disengage from 'the unbearable lightness of being' and retreat into the world of Faiz Ahmed Faiz for solace. There will be other decades.

possess them to the highest degree - but they keep that in the shadows under control and that is what we could discern in the way the VPP staged their walk-out, graceful, noble and evaded. This was the dynamic many were expecting and waiting for from the VPP and it was fired on the very first day of the Assembly session - a genuine Khasi fighting for a sensible cause. This act will have an invaluable effect for the Party.  
If English is a foreign language which we should not accept then so is democracy. Is it appropriate for the elected representatives to be addressed in a language they do not understand? No. They must be respected by anyone who is required to address them. It is appropriate for the House to be conducted in this? Time will tell because the answer to that will settle the greatest dispute that confronts the country today.  
Yours etc.,  
Gregory Shullai,  
Via email

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**Is prayer in public spaces an anathema?**

By Barnes Mawrie

These past few days, there have been a number of articles appearing in the Shillong Times criticising the Christian MDA 2.0 leaders for seeking blessings from their church leaders. Some of these writings have put the church leaders themselves in bad light, as if they have committed a crime in offering prayers for these leaders. In this particular article I wish to clear the toxic air that is circulating around us due to these writings.

First of all, we need to understand the socio-cultural and religious context of our country India. It is good to keep in mind that secularism underpinned in western countries is quite different from that of our country. Secularism in the west emerged as an offshoot of protest against the Church, advocated by freemasons and atheistic ideologues. Secularism which got a decisive stamp in the French Revolution of 1789, was in fact the ideology of freemasons like Maximilien Robespierre. Western ideology is characterized by dualism in every aspect, therefore the revolutionists succeeded in segregating the church from politics. This movement gained momentum since the French Revolution and gradually the church was forced to estrange herself from political life.

"The Pope is considered by the international community as the legal 'head of state' and he appoints his representatives in different countries. So for all practical purposes the church is very much still in politics. It ought to do so because man as we understand cannot be dissected into two selves - a spiritual man and a material man - but he is an integral whole. Thus, it would be absurd to say that the church should cater only to the spiritual man for that would be a dangerous dichotomy."

The Treaty of Lateran in 1929 between the Vatican and Benito Mussolini, however, should not be perceived as the church being cut off from mundane politics, but instead it was an affirmation that faith and politics cannot be separated. It should not be forgotten that Vatican is a political state with all diplomatic rights and privileges like other countries. The Pope is considered by the international community as the legal 'head of state' and he appoints his representatives in different countries. So for all practical purposes the church is very much still in politics. It ought to do so because man as we understand cannot be dissected into two selves - a spiritual man and a material man - but he is an integral whole. Thus, it would be absurd to say that the church should cater only to the spiritual man for that would be a dangerous dichotomy. Religion works for the salvation of the whole person and not for part of him or her. For this reason those who advocate that religion should have nothing to do with politics, are being whimsical to say the least.

When it comes to India, we all know that our concept of secularism is not based on a philosophy of dualism. This is the reason why unlike in the west where philosophy and theology are two distinct disciplines, in India these two merge together. The custom philosophy is one of unity and not of duality. To an Indian and much more to a tribal person, there is no such a thing as religion disconnected from socio-political life. Thus for an Indian or a tribal person, to separate religion from politics is something unthinkable and incomprehensible. Therefore when our political leaders seek God's blessings from the church it is only a manifestation of our Indian or tribal characteristics. I am surprised why people are so frantic about this as if the whole world would collapse. We should be happy that our leaders still understand the necessity of divine assistance in their ministry.

When the Hindu fundamentalists are doing today (destroying churches and mosques or attacking Christian religious services etc) are totally against the secular values that our constitution enshrines. With regards to praying before the assembly session, I fail to understand why people are so fidgety about it. I would be happy to see prayers being said before any parliament session. Since our MPs come from different faiths it would be more proper to have an interfaith prayer session. India is basically a religious country (the cradle of world religions) so praying in the parliament or in the assemblies should not be strange at all. I do appreciate the initiative taken in Meghalaya to begin assembly sessions with a prayer. Since more than 95% of our MLAs are Christians so saying a Christian prayer should be a normal thing, or else an interfaith prayer could be held. This is left to our MLAs to decide among themselves for we the public have no right to comment on that for they are our representatives whom we have willfully elected.

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"Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace."

—Amelia Earhart

The Shillong Times

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Peril in Punjab

THE Punjab Police and the state government would need to give a lot of explanation as to how they have allowed the situation to reach a level wherein a militant preacher by name Amritpal Singh operated there without any hindrance for the past few years. He has projected himself as Bhindranwale 2.0, moved around with armed supporters, raised a militant outfit by the name Waris Punjab De, and finally escaped with relative ease from a police crackdown last week. The High Court in Chandigarh has asked a pointed questions as to how all this could happen when the state is having a police strength of 80,000 personnel.

The sensitivity about Punjab needs no re-iteration. It was after much bloodshed and painstaking efforts over several years that calm was restored in the state since the eruption of the Khalistan movement spearheaded by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale with backing from the Pakistani army's ISI intelligence wing. The events in Punjab had veered towards a separatist movement and ultimately claimed the life of the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi in October 1984, four months after Operation Bluestar in which Bhindranwale and many of his followers were killed by security forces in the holy Golden Temple. The Indira assassination sparked the Delhi riots where the Sikh community were targeted and many lost their hearts and homes. Yet, the political leadership showed a sense of maturity in restoring peace and granting Punjab what was its due. There has been peace and political stability ever since, with the state's leadership firmly in the hands of Sikhs through successive governments. It ended up with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) after the Akali Dal, Congress era.

Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's promise on Tuesday to do his best to maintain peace in the state is itself cannot exonerate him from the guilt of having abjectly failed to rise up to the occasion and to act effectively in checking the recurrence of militancy. As per reports, Amritpal Singh was planning a state-wide outreach to "baptize youth for suicide attack missions and used de-addiction centres to stockpile weapons sourced from Pakistan." It is another matter that Pakistan no longer has the capacity to needle India but a collapsing power can sometimes go any lengths too. The question that arises is what were the central agencies and the Union Home Ministry doing so far to checkmate these fresh attempts at re-igniting militancy in Punjab? The crackdown on Saturday saw the involvement of the central agencies too and yet the key figure has made good his escape. All efforts to locate Amritpal Singh have failed. This is a serious matter and one of great concern for the country.

Mawroh-Mawkyroh-Mawlai road construction

Much has been written and many opinions given through this paper in the past on bad roads and road construction in Shillong city, not to speak of rural roads. We all are concerned about public property and assets, since such roads come once every 50 years or so. The current double-laning of Mawroh - Mawkyroh road leading up to ISBT which is long-awaited is near completion. Thanks to the PWD Roads and for the contractors for making this happen although it has taken more than 2 years for this stretch near completion. However, I would once again point out as a lay person that the quality of work is not up to the standards laid down for road construction. I have seen many roads constructed, while passing through the length and breadth of this state, Garo Hills, Assam etc. All I can say is this - the roads here are of poor quality. Roads constructed by renowned companies groups as per specifications are always good and last for years. This road is only a few months old and we can see the unevenness, especially at night when the lights are on. Smoothness is a concern

Last Monday during the inaugural address of the governor, Phagu Chauhan agitated Anand Miller Basia and leader of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) led his MLAs to walk out of the Assembly in protest against the governor who spoke in Hindi. The newly appointed governor's decision baffled many. It was only right that the VPP registered their objection very strongly. Interrupting his speech soon after it started, Basia went on to use Hindi because Meghalaya is not a Hindi speaking state and that very few in the House understand the language. He alleged that a precedent is being set as an attempt by the central government to impose Hindi in the state. The chief minister rose up to defend the governor saying that the governor can't read English and therefore, as per the rule, the speech in Hindi was continued. Permitted to do so by the Speaker, the Nongkrem MLA and three of his colleagues boycotted the customary inaugural session by walking out.

One does not wish to believe that there is an agenda to impose Hindi in the state. But it is true that the Modi government send a governor who can't even read English to Meghalaya? The central government is fully aware that very few in the state understand Hindi. In 2018 when the then governor, Ganga Prasad addressed the House in Hindi there were protests. Amarendra Lyngdoh, then in the Opposition, and a couple of other MLAs reacted by speaking in their mother tongues. Are we to believe that no one who can speak English is available to be appointed governor in the state? That is a joke really! The present governor might have been appointed intentionally so that under the pretext that he does not even read the Roman script, his speech in the Assembly will be in Hindi in the hope that it will be accepted. A precedent has been set that is then created. The use of Hindi is therefore normalised inside and outside the house. This is the thought and the plan. The rule may now force the Governor to address the House in Hindi but the intention is suspect.

The statement of the VPP's leader is now expunged. His interruptions are deemed disrespectful by no less than the chief minister himself. However, it is the central government which is disrespecting the people of Meghalaya by appointing governors who don't understand them. The

role and function of the governor is not limited to just reading the written speech in the Legislative Assembly. The governor also attends functions. If he speaks in a language no one understands his presence will be futile. Here the issue goes far beyond respecting a particular language. The implications are serious. Everyone respects all the languages. A point is made by the editor of this paper while reacting to comments on her Facebook post. If memos and are presented to the governor will it mean that they will have to be in Hindi? Or will the English memos be first translated into Hindi for the governor alone? How practical is that? Will the Bills from HADAC

because the thickness of the bitumen is very poor. The uppermost layer should have been of 6 inches thickness or more. The bitumen is not visible. The smoother and bear the load of heavy vehicles. Currently we do not know who the contractors undertaking this important task are. This road is already busy and traffic will be enormous once it is completed. I don't know how long the road will last and the public would be the losers and suffers in future. I would request the PWD Roads to please conduct a proper spot inspection and supervision to oversee the quality of work before giving the completion certificate.

Further, roads will not last in the absence of drainage systems. Till date there are no signs of drain construction. I would suggest that side drains be simultaneously constructed so that rain water will not erode the road. Moreover, road markings sideways and in the middle for safety sake has not been done since the road is already functional. I would request the engineers and subordinate officers of PWD to act immediately as this road is under construction and nearing completion. Please do not leave the work to the "contractors" alone. For the future we all want to see good quality roads in our Shillong city and not sub-standard ones. Further, the much-awaited road from Mawroh-Punjab

at Bank and Civil Hospital. Definitely, residents of the Southern part of Shillong will be using this road. It will be a major pain for those who have to go to Police Bazar, must drive around the area petrol pump, the most congested area of the city. To avoid this impractical traffic arrangement, we are bound to take the road via Pine Mount School, and unnecessarily overcrowd the road from Bank to Civil Hospital. Therefore, diverting the traffic to other routes causes traffic jams. Many times, the flow of traffic gets disrupted because of bad and erratic behaviour of the drivers. On top of that Government vehicles are daily violating traffic rules. Look how they crush us. They are always in a hurry, for what? Difficult to answer.

The Government should immediately identify spaces to allow street vendors a safe and respectable place. They should not be allowed to sit on the curbs of the road. They encroach a major part of the road and footpath, which adds to traffic jams. We always notice that the PWD road from Laban Sports Centre till Seven Star School is converted to a parking area. Surely when vehicles are allowed to park only on one side, a two-way traffic on the road may be allowed, when the road from Crimline to Bank is always a two-way road. This will avoid congestion at the twin junctions

Hindi goes far beyond the Governor's address

By Albert Thyrning

chief secretary Renu Sharma because his MLAs don't understand Hindi. I see the Congress think tank putting off their thinking caps and pondering the best solution to the nightmare brought about by their leader opening his mouth at Cambridge. "An important issue like Adams being sidelined because the treasury benches are attacking Rahul," said a worried leader of the opposition party to me. "And now the Delhi police have also got an arrest warrant for him!" said another leader. "Looks like our dear Rahul is destined for Tihar!" "We told him last week not to trim his hair or beard," said the spokesman of the party angrily. "Looks like he did not listen to you," I said. "He listened to the barber," said the same spokesman shaking his head in frustration. "We knew for sure that the ruling party will hell bent on seeing he shaved his hair and beard. They knew a lot of his strength and wisdom came out of those long locks! India loved him with those locks!" "So, did they send a Delhi barber to him?" I smiled and asked. "In a way, yes, but a Delhi is the form of a

The newly appointed governor's decision baffled many. It was only right that the VPP registered their objection very strongly, interrupting his speech soon after it started. Basia went on to use Hindi because Meghalaya is not a Hindi speaking state and that very few in the House understand the language.

GHADC and GHADC. He first made available in Hindi for the governor so that he can read them carefully, before he rejects or assents to them? Is that realistic? Will the Legislative Assembly's Bills also be first translated into Hindi for the sake of the governor? It's certainly time consuming. All the ADC's and state government's Bills will lapse in Raj Bhavan. Is this not a state respect for the State of Meghalaya? In the present circumstances it is mandatory for Meghalaya's governor to know English if the titular seat was to be tendered himself to the people of the state.

There are those who point out that there is no harm if Hindi is used in the governor's address because Hindi is one of the 22 official languages in India. Well said! That does it mean that any of those 22 languages can be used in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly? If tomorrow a governor insists that he or she address the House in Bengali because he/she does not know any other language will no one raise objections? The same with Assamese or Tamil or Malayalam or Gujarati or Khasmiri or any other lan-

guage in the official list. If these languages were to be used in Meghalaya's session, it would be the same as listening to the take place not because MLAs don't like these languages but simply because they don't understand them. You may refer to these mentioned languages are not official languages in Meghalaya. Hindi too is not an official language here. Hindi has no primary or greater languages listed in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution. Providing a translated version of the governor's speech is not the same as listening to the person. If a simultaneous translation is available to each member in the Assembly, the language can be accepted. As of now that facility is not there.

The chief minister has staunchly defended the governor. This is not surprising given his closeness with the BJP and its top leaders. His justification that Hindi be respected must be pleasing to all over the country. It is no longer a secret that the theory of one nation, one language, one culture, one religion and one law is to be pursued as an agenda. It is understandable that as a head of the government which has the blessings of the BJP, the chief minister is compelled to stand by the Governor. But there are instances where chief ministers publicly disagreed with their respective national and international issues. In January this year in Tamil Nadu, Chief Minister, MK Stalin moved a resolution which was highly appreciated by the Governor, RM Ravji for skipping the mention of DMK's former, Periyar, BR Ambedkar and two former chief ministers. The incident saw the governor walking out of the House. That is one of the rarest of rare cases. In November last year, the chief minister, P. Venu Prasad saw the governor walking out of the House. That is one of the rarest of rare cases. In November last year, the chief minister, P. Venu Prasad saw the governor walking out of the House. That is one of the rarest of rare cases.

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Bob's Banter A Bride for Rahul

By Robert Clements

With attacks on poor Rahul worsening by the day, in my very vivid imagination I see the Congress think tank putting off their thinking caps and pondering the best solution to the nightmare brought about by their leader opening his mouth at Cambridge. "An important issue like Adams being sidelined because the treasury benches are attacking Rahul," said a worried leader of the opposition party to me. "And now the Delhi police have also got an arrest warrant for him!" said another leader. "Looks like our dear Rahul is destined for Tihar!" "We told him last week not to trim his hair or beard," said the spokesman of the party angrily. "Looks like he did not listen to you," I said. "He listened to the barber," said the same spokesman shaking his head in frustration. "We knew for sure that the ruling party will hell bent on seeing he shaved his hair and beard. They knew a lot of his strength and wisdom came out of those long locks! India loved him with those locks!" "So, did they send a Delhi barber to him?" I smiled and asked. "In a way, yes, but a Delhi is the form of a



lady barber, who told him, "I would like to see you seen and off came his hair." "You have any strategy to save him?" I asked. "You guys are supposed to be the think-tank of the party! I am your living!" "Easier said than done," said the first think tanker. "We have always relied on the High Command to make all decisions and now that very high command is powerless! We have never practiced decision making!"

I left the worried congressmen for a while and went out for some fresh air. I found one of the think tankers standing next to me. "We are stuck," he said as he looked at me beseechingly. "I can see that," I said sharply. "Can you help us?" "Whoa! Whoa!" I said, "I have no experience in such matters. I am no politician!" "We know that," said the think tanker curly. "We don't need any political decisions to be made, for that we have the High Command." I rolled my eyes upward then hastily rolled them back in place as he continued. "What we need is a management guru who will teach us the art of thinking and decision making!"

"Sure," I said. "I know an excellent man. Let me call him and see if he's free to give you people a crash course today!" It was two hours after the crash course that in my very vivid imagination, I returned to the party headquarters and found the whole camp in jubilation. They were garlanding the "thinking guru" and seeing me, they threw some flowers my way. "He is excellent!" said the spokesman who had first spoken to me. "We can now think freely, without help from the high command, and have decided to tackle this problem head on!"

"Amazing!" I said, "and how do you intend helping your young dimpled leader?" "We have decided to get Rahul married!" "Married?" I whispered, "and how on earth will a bride marry Rahul's problems disappear?" "We have decided to get Rahul married!" "Married?" I whispered, "and how on earth will a bride marry Rahul's problems disappear?" "We have decided to get Rahul married!" "Married?" I whispered, "and how on earth will a bride marry Rahul's problems disappear?"

at Bank and Civil Hospital. Definitely, residents of the Southern part of Shillong will be using this road. It will be a major pain for those who have to go to Police Bazar, must drive around the area petrol pump, the most congested area of the city. To avoid this impractical traffic arrangement, we are bound to take the road via Pine Mount School, and unnecessarily overcrowd the road from Bank to Civil Hospital. Therefore, diverting the traffic to other routes causes traffic jams. Many times, the flow of traffic gets disrupted because of bad and erratic behaviour of the drivers. On top of that Government vehicles are daily violating traffic rules. Look how they crush us. They are always in a hurry, for what? Difficult to answer.

The Government should immediately identify spaces to allow street vendors a safe and respectable place. They should not be allowed to sit on the curbs of the road. They encroach a major part of the road and footpath, which adds to traffic jams. We always notice that the PWD road from Laban Sports Centre till Seven Star School is converted to a parking area. Surely when vehicles are allowed to park only on one side, a two-way traffic on the road may be allowed, when the road from Crimline to Bank is always a two-way road. This will avoid congestion at the twin junctions

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 suitable details will be published.

"Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance." — Confucius

The Shillong Times

Vol No. 57, No. 232 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 2023

World Water Day passes by MARCH 22 is observed as World Water Day but like every other day set aside to remind people of the importance of an issue or other, this day too passed by uneventfully except for a function for school/college students at the Soso Thum auditorium where dignitaries said their rehearsed pieces. Water is life and acknowledging this is the first step towards not only conserving water through judicious use but also in conserving water sources, catchments and above all our rivers. The theme for World Water Day, 2023 is "Accelerating the change to solve the water and sanitation crisis." In Meghalaya we have a humungous problem with both. Most septic tanks are emptied into rivers, thereby assailing our water sources relentlessly. Yet there is no way that action can be and is being taken against such polluters. In Meghalaya laws are made to be broken with impunity. Water crisis looms large in the state. Both the state and central government are trampling about the Jal Jeevan Mission but unless there are sources to draw water from, how does water come to the homes of people? With rapid deforestation water sources are dwindling. There is as yet no study on the loss of forest cover in Meghalaya.

In 2012, just two months after introducing a policy to promote mining, Meghalaya diluted the definition of "forest". On December 28, 2012 the state government amended its Forest Regulation Act of 1973 and said only a "compact and continuous tract of minimum four hectares" will now be considered as forest in the state. The government says the amendment is to provide clarity to the unclear definition of forest. The new definition specifies that an area should have more than 250 naturally growing trees with a girth size of 15 cm or more per hectare (ha) to be regarded as forest. In case of a bamboo dominant patch, more than 100 naturally growing clumps should be present per ha. In case of mixed vegetation, the number changes to 150 trees and over 40 bamboo clumps. By the above definition there is no more forest in Meghalaya. This was done to facilitate quick clearance for mining. Without forests how can there be catchments?

It is said, "Water is Life." Sadly no one mentioned World Water Day in the Assembly even while one member asked why the Greater Shillong Water Supply Scheme (GSWSS) is delayed - a banal question especially if the MLA follows the trail of the Umiev River which flows towards Mawphlang and checks out how ugly and polluted the water is.

According to UN Reports inadequate access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene causes death to another 1.4 million people annually, and the lives of another 74 million people is cut short. Around 44% of household wastewater globally is not treated properly. On the other hand, global water demand is expected to increase by 55% by 2050. Who will do the water requirements survey in Meghalaya and who will push the agenda of water conservation and keeping the rivers clean?

Letters to the Editor

Aversion to Hindi as a language

Editor, It is really disheartening to read about the negative reactions of respectable upright people to the use of Hindi by our Honourable Governor in his Address to the first Assembly Session of the year. Let us remind ourselves that we are part of the Indian territory and our state has enjoyed statehood for more than fifty years. We live in a democracy where our organs of government function according to the provisions of the Constitution of India and we avail of all the rights and freedoms mentioned thereof. India has vast geographical linguistic varieties. We wear different clothes, eat different kinds of food, observe different religious practices and speak different languages etc. Therefore what we need is national integration; that is, a common identity among the citizens of the country. It is the duty of every person as a citizen to oppose the forces and ideas that weaken national unity and integration. It is indeed a proud moment for the State of Meghalaya when Rishi Babu Lalou

was adjudged 'Best Commander' during the National Cadet Corps (NCC) Prime Minister's Rally held at Canappa Parade Ground in New Delhi on January 28, 2023. It was not an easy task for her to lead a thousand cadets as she had to undergo several stages of training and trials to get selected. She was indeed the best as her voice resounded across the ground in Hindi - an exemplar par excellence!!!

What is to be emphasized here is that this is not the time to brood and lament why we are unable to understand or communicate in a language that is spoken by almost 45% of the people in our country. Those born before the 20th century are unlikely enough to lack the opportunity and exposure to learn a language other than our mother tongue and the language taught in schools. But the younger generation should not be made to feel inferior to their counterparts in the rest of the country just because they cannot speak or understand a language other than their own. Apparently the 'old guard' had a much bigger role to play by being selfless and not guiding the young generation to climb to greater heights. Knowledge of languages is the doorway to wisdom. The more lan-

guages you know the more human you are, otherwise we voluntarily make our lives so helpless and so ridiculous when we cannot connect with the world. Let us encourage our young boys and girls to blend in and intermingle with the rest of the society by being able to speak a language that will help in creating relationships with the multitude. Learning a language will open students to a world of opportunities. They become aware of new cultures and develop a greater understanding and appreciation of other people and improve their ability to communicate and interact positively with other people. "The man who does not know other languages, unless he is a man of genius, necessarily has deficiencies in his virtues." Victor Hugo Yours etc., Corina Lyngdoh, Shillong - 3

Need to prioritise educational needs

Editor, I couldn't help but respond to Biplab Kr Deo's re-

Local right wing vs. National right wing

By Bhagtoram Mawroh

The entire fracas that took place in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly over the Governor's decision to give his remarks in Hindi is indicative of the fact that regionalism, in this case exemplified by Khasi sub-nationalism, is not going away anytime soon. While the shouting of slogans against the Governor was not desirable, the walk-out by the four VPP (Voice of Peoples' Party) MLAs led by Ardon Mar Bhasinwom was not difficult to predict. There are two main ideologies that define the VPP, their claim to local politics and a pro-jaijyanti stand on issues. If they had not reacted to the action of the Governor it would have put a dent on the later rising doubt in the mind of a growing number of Khasi voters if they indeed can defend the right of the indigenous Khasi people against that of a competing Hindu ideology being propagated by the BJP.

Notwithstanding the admonishment by the Chief Minister the scene created by VPP in the Assembly will most probably help them in their quest to win more electoral seats in the future. This is exactly what the BJP has done in the other parts of the country. The most recent example was seen in Uttar Pradesh when during its last Assembly elections the outgoing Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath stated that the elections in the state will be '80 per cent versus 20 per cent' in a veiled reference to the percentage of the Muslim population in the country. Predictably BJP won the elections and Yogi Adityanath became the Chief Minister once again. However, I don't think VPP is going to form the government anytime soon. The elections in the State have just got over and five years is a very long time for people to find out if promises made during elections will actually be delivered. Since VPP claims that they will practice clean politics, they, more than others, will have to work extra hard to show that they have actually brought tangible changes on the ground especially in their own constituencies. If not they will be just another flash in the pan, not unlike many others from the past and many who will appear in the future as well.

Coming back to the controversy regarding the Governor's speech in Hindi, many would remember that something similar had happened in the past as well. In 2018, the then Meghalaya Governor Ganga Prasad had created an uproar when he did the same thing during the first day of the Budget session. That time it was Congress legislator from East Shillong, Amparen Lyngdoh who had staged a walkout soon after the governor began his address. This time she is in the ruling party and did not do such thing. But she did voice her displeasure at the repeat of the incident in her interaction with the press. Then just before the elections there was the RSS (Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh) leader Mohan Bhagwat who declared that everyone in Meghalaya is a Hindu. It was unclear that there was the future over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019 whose aim was to legalize illegal immigration on the basis of religion. This was done notwithstanding the fact that the Act harboured great dangers to the indigenous peoples of North East including Meghalaya. But perhaps

that was the actual intention of the Act. Only time will tell. But apart from the ones mentioned above there were some subtle but important decisions made by the BJP during the recently concluded assembly elections to impress their ideology on the people of Meghalaya. After BJP was unable to gain any seats during the recently concluded election it was revealed that the BJP central leadership had their choice of candidates in three constituencies while in the remaining 57 seats the state unit was given a free hand. One of the candidates chosen by the central leadership was former IPS officer Manohar Kharkrang to contest from North Shillong. While the party can argue that they chose him to show their commitment to the issue of law and order the choice of Kharkrang who was a Superintendent of Police, East Khasi Hill during the heydays of INLC (Hindu nationalist National Liberation Council) was very telling. If he had won they would have (most probably) unfurled the national flag as a rejection of the Khasi sub-nationalism by the local populace. It is interesting

to note that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's roadshow started from the Central Library and ended in Police Bazar Khyndaidai which falls under North Shillong. BJP never very well that they would not have enough seats to form the government on their own but in terms of messaging, a win in North Shillong would have been very significant. The local right wing was also very much aware of that. During the initial rounds of counting, Kharkrang did not get more than 2000 votes in the first round while Adesh Nongrum, VPP's candidate got less than 500 votes. The same thing happened in the second round as well. The presences of a local YouTube channel which was covering the election became very distraught when the BJP candidate lost. The presences expressed con-

cern at the prospects of a BJP victory on the aspirations of the politics of jaijyanti. While they were quite impartial in their coverage of results from the other constituencies they were clearly invested in BJP not winning in North Shillong. To their relief, Adesh replicated Kharkrang's performance from the first to a round by getting more than 4000 votes in the remaining two rounds to achieve a final tally of 5333 votes ultimately winning by less than a thousand votes. To the disappointment of the BJP, the Khasi votes consolidated and did not vote as many as BJP had hoped. In this case, the local right wing was able to overcome the national right wing.

What happened it is not just the VPP which is invested in a pro-jaijyanti politics. While the Chief Minister Conrad Sangma may have tried to defend his speech of Governor in Hindi he has on occasions shown himself to be aware of his indigenous identity especially of professing a faith considered by the local people as being alien to the sub-continent. The prayer service he held after winning elections was

not the first one. When he formed the government for the first time in 2018 he had organized a similar prayer meeting. He had also organized 'Meghalaya Prays' in 2020 where he stated, "Despite the catastrophe that surrounds us as we fight Covid-19, that has endangered human life and disrupted global economy, we draw inspiration from the life of Jesus Christ - His agony on the Cross and the power of his Resurrection - which is our living hope. This crisis has brought nations together irrespective of races, creed and class to unite in breaking the transmission chain by doing our part". There's no mistaking the importance of his religious identity of which Conrad Sangma has been quite explicit. When the Indian security forces killed innocent Naga civilians in Oting (Mon district, Nagaland) he was the first head of state from the North East to demand the repeal of the draconian AFSPA (Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act). While his party voted for the CAA in the Indian parliament he was able to get an exemption for the Sixth Schedule Areas of Meghalaya from the implementation of the Act. So, he would argue that although he had to make decisions because of political compulsions he did not sell out the indigenous peoples of the State. Indeed, recently his party expressed its reservations against the proposed Uniform Civil Code of the BJP. But if the recent events that transpired in the Assembly are any indication, the balancing act that Conrad Sangma performs is going to come under increasing pressure in the upcoming future.

Make no mistake, the Governor's speech in Hindi was not an accident but a part of the attempt by the national right wing, represented by the BJP, to push its agenda of a 'one nation one language, one etc., etc.' The hand local right wing led by VPP has replicated it very stylishly and for the sake of their own political relevance they will have to continue doing so in the future as well. The soft right wing represented by the Congress is not the difficult task of keeping both happy as he needs them or the constituency they represent for his own political ambitions. All of this means that Meghalaya's political landscape is poised to become very interesting in the upcoming days.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organization or institution. Training Colleges be established? Special training is required for primary teaching and the B Ed syllabus does not do justice to addressing the teaching learning process exhaustively for primary school children. And lastly if we can apply the correlation of all subjects under Environmental Studies at the primary level it will cut down on teacher requirements. The time table will be spaced out well to cover all subjects (Languages, Maths, Social Sciences). Proper training in this method is of great importance though. I had expressed my suggestions on how to take up learning at the village level when I responded to an article by Patricia Mukhim on education. Again, I respond with the hope that some of the ideas expressed are taken up by people who truly care about the sorry and sad plight of education at the rural areas.

Yours etc., Kevin Phillips, Via email

Rahul Gandhi has to do quick follow-up from his gains from Bharat Jodo Yatra

By Sushil Kutty

The Congress MP has no time to lose if he wants to take on Narendra Modi

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi is a late bloomer. That said, he has been a Member of Parliament several times over and, therefore, cannot be reduced to a Johnny come lately. And after Amethi, he was a stranger to the voters of Wayanad. But it is hardly likely that Rahul Gandhi will retrace his steps to Amethi, the constituency that rejected him but was also a pocket borough of the Gandhi family for the longest time.

Then again, he has seen, after winning Wayanad in 2019, that the Kerala voter has only warm vibes for the Gandhi family since, Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra would through Kerala for the most number of BJP days, 181. And from the looks of it, the 2024 results will show how much of a success a reminder of the moving geminity that characterized the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra' when it wound its way from south to north.

To ensure that the best of the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra' did not go to waste, Rahul Gandhi should undertake state-wide yatras. The container-homes must be still around. And people of the election-bound states would be influenced by the goodwill generated by the success of the Bharat Jodo Yatra. You see, the Congress victory in Himachal Pradesh was a sign of the success of the Bharat Jodo Yatra. And talking of the upcoming assembly elections, Rahul Gandhi and his cohorts, of whom none qualify to be "advisors", shouldn't waste time and resources running tit-for-tat maligning cam-

paigned. Instead, the focus should be on sticking to a single-issue diatribe directed especially towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi. For Modi

"But if he lets the hair grow like he did during the Bharat Jodo Yatra, he might be the Pied Piper people have been waiting for all these nine years."

might even sweep 'God's Own Country'. But while Kerala is predictable, with the people of Kerala among the most enthusiastic about dynastic succession, Rahul Gandhi somehow does not fit the role of prince-charmer.

But if he lets the hair grow like he did during the Bharat Jodo Yatra, he might be the Pied Piper people have been waiting for all these nine years. For that to happen, however, he will have to reinvent himself in more ways than one when he was walking the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra' from Kanyakumari to Kashmir.

One of the developments since the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', and his London sojourn, is that the Congress wants Rahul Gandhi to be the prime ministerial face of the Opposition. To cement that thought, the Congress led by Rahul Gandhi must win at least three states, where assembly elections are lined up for this year.

The Congress must announce the BJP in Karnataka, win Madhya Pradesh, and see to it that both Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh are retained. This would require smaller versions of the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', i.e., a 'Madhya Pradesh Jodo Yatra', a 'Chhattisgarh Jodo Yatra', and a 'Rajasthan Jodo Yatra'.

Rahul Gandhi's 'Bharat Jodo Yatra' had cut through Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. Carrying forward the Bharat Jodo Yatra, albeit on a smaller scale, would be the man to defeat! And something like the Modi-Adani-Hindenburg issue can put Modi in a bind. That being said, the past few days have seen lots of hatred spilt at each other by both parties. However, it would be a waste if the Congress is to start the electorate into voting the Congress is not taken seriously by Rahul Gandhi. Rahul Gandhi's epithet, when it comes to being written, would be 'Bloomer & Bloopers'. It is only in the last six to seven months that Rahul Gandhi found his voice. Otherwise, it was a clique of Congress bigwigs who picked the choice of words for Rahul Gandhi. Congress bigwigs such as Jai Ram Ramesh who sticks to Rahul Gandhi's shadow come rain or shine. And then Rahul Gandhi forgets what he should be saying. The "Unfortunately, I am MP" shouldn't have happened at all. But it did and part of the blame goes to Jai Ram Ramesh. The Congress 'ideology' may not survive a Congress defeat in 2024. Ideally, Rahul Gandhi should transform himself into a serious politician. And from what is being talked about, the transformation started long ago. At this point in time, Rahul Gandhi is considered by millions of Indians as a man bonded to take on Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2024. But those who want to thwart him and his plans include some of the biggest politicians in India. (HPI Service)



The Kerala leg of the Bharat Jodo Yatra would turn out to be: A year from now, we will know. If Rahul sticks to Wayanad, the Congress

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

*"Without a sense of urgency, desire loses its value."*

— Jim Rohn

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No 151 No. 221 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 2023

**Jail for Rahul**

CURIOSLY, a Surat court has thought it fit to jail top Congress figure Rahul Gandhi over a statement he made at the height of the 2019 general election campaign in Kolar, Karnataka. The magistrate court has however avoided creating a sensation by quickly granting the senior leader bail and a month's time to go on appeal. The different layers of the justice-dispensation mechanism strengthen the judicial system and help it retain its sanctity. A re-examination of a judgment by a more mature higher court could set right a wrong, if any, committed by a lower court. Had this system not been in place the result would have been utter chaos. Rahul Gandhi can expect a fair deal.

The main charge in this case was the "insult" that a community with a common surname faced as a whole from the poster from Rahul Gandhi — "How come all the thieves have the common surname Modi?" The comment obviously targeted Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to also draw in fugitives fighting extradition cases in foreign soil like Lalit Modi and Nirav Modi. The political punch could not be lost sight of and chances are that even the 'Modis' laughed it off; but not the Surat BJP legislator and former minister Purnesh Modi, who went and filed the case. What however raised eyebrows was that the court that handled the case saw repeated change of magistrates. This led to concern in Congress circles that the BJP in power was bent on playing games with Rahul Gandhi. A 'teasing game' has been going on against the Congress leader for a long time. This is no laughing matter, though.

The beauty of democracy is the freedom it grants to people to hold forth; criticise those in authority, alongside the right it grants to citizens to choose as to who should represent and rule them and the nation. The system, despite its flaws, is cited as the best governance system by far. Its strength and dignity are principally what those in power accord to it by fair play. This is true of the judiciary too. What goes without saying is that leaders on the opposition side too must conduct themselves in a responsible manner. This apart, it should also be stressed in this context that the justice dispensation system must change with the times. Even petty law violations are treated as serious criminal charges and jail sentences awarded, where perhaps a fine should serve the purpose. This too might be viewed by many as one such case. If teasing is the name of the game, time alone would say who made a laughing stock of whom.

**A return to the Linkage**

**The beauty of linguistic diversity**

Editor,

The irony of the Hindi-English debate after what happened on March 20, 2023 the first day of the budget session in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly is that if one goes just 20 kms from Shillong to Sana village which falls under Nongstrem constituency, very few will be able to speak, write or even understand English let alone Hindi. The bigger irony is that of Meghalaya has a Governor who has a good command of the English language and if he had delivered his inaugural speech in English, I bet about 50 percent of our legislators will not be able to fully grasp what he is saying since legislative jargon is hard to grasp if one doesn't have a good command of the English language.

In terms of linguistic diversity, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is like a mini North India in itself. All the dialects are related and interconnected but each dialect has its own nuances which make it difficult to speak or understand if one is a non-native speaker of the particular

dialect. A Gujarati and a Bihari who speak Bhojpuri will find it hard to communicate with one another even though both the languages are related and they both belong to the same group of languages. Likewise a War Khasi from Pnarutsa and a Pnar from Mokokoiaw will find it difficult to communicate with each other even though both the dialects belong to the same group of languages. For the people of North and West India, Hindi is the link language and for the Khasi and Jaintia community, the Sohra dialect is the link language.

The point I'm trying to make is that the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is a hotspot with high linguistic diversity and the beauty of it all is that all the dialects are related and interconnected. My father's dialect which is the Mawsynram dialect is different from my mother's dialect which is a variation of a dialect spoken in certain parts of Khasi Hills; both dialects are also different from the Sohra dialect spoken at home.

Another point to remember is that the quality of English education in the state as a whole is not up to the mark and the majority of the inhabitants of the state are handicapped especially when it comes to written

**Hypocrisy of the coal mining lobby**

By Patricia Mukhim

On March 21, Santa Marya Shylla of the coal-rich Singu Saipung constituency spoke on behalf of the people who have been reduced to poverty after the ban on coal mining. We don't expect anything else from someone whose family owns coal mines and coke units within the constituency. Jaintia Hills is now a battleground between the "High Level" who will manage to mine coal and transport despite the NGT ban in 2014 and the Low Level who are the owners of small mines. The High Level because of its connections in the Government (of course on payment) manage to send the coal out surreptitiously. In this transaction the Government (meaning the democratically elected one) does not earn a single penny of revenue but individuals within the Government have made a killing. All the crores spent during the recently held elections come from this transaction. Coal mining is bad for the environment but turning coal into coke is a dangerous activity as it poisons the air. But who cares? The coke unit owners can shift to Shillong any day. It's the poor who will have to live with the toxic air from the coke units and poisoned water from the acid mine drainage.

That there is irreparable damage to the environment from coal mining, especially from the unscientific rat hole mining, goes without saying. First the rat hole mines have claimed many lives and most of the deaths are unreported because those who risk their lives to go into those death traps are some of the poorest. Their lives are up for sale. And till date we have never heard the coal lobby speak of rejuvenating the environment; of reclaiming abandoned mines and planting trees. No, these are things they won't do because it means shelling out money. And look at the State Government of Meghalaya and its Environment and Forest Department! It has never told the mine owners to pay for environmental services. Does that part of the earth belong only to the few mine owners that they are allowed to do just what they want? How can a few wealthy and powerful people be allowed to destroy the environment at this scale while people watch helplessly? Thankfully the Meghalaya High

Court has now ordered the CISF to monitor all these criminal acts. Now let's look at the destruction caused by coal mining in Meghalaya. The first is the loss of wildlife. Coal mining requires forest areas to be cleared. Hence when the mining operation begins the bulldozer gets to work and flattens everything first. As a result this destroys sizeable ranges of wilderness area, displacing the native fauna and removing habitat and food sources. This eventually results in an imbalanced ecosystem -- and even the endangerment or extinction of entire species.

The sink holes or rat holes result in mire subsidence

of the soil. When this acid run-off from the coal streaks (AMD) sinks into the ground it affects groundwater and contaminates it and consequently the PH balance is disturbed because the acid content in water is high. Similarly the rivers and streams are affected with the AMD.

Coal dust and coke units in addition to being dirty and unpleasant smelling cause air pollution and are dangerous if inhaled over an extensive period of time. People with prolonged exposure to coal dust are at high risk of contracting "Black lung disease", which left untreated can lead to lung cancer, pulmonary tuberculosis, and

heart failure. But worse is that coal and coal waste contain heavy metals such as lead, mercury and arsenic, which are highly toxic both to plant and animal life.

But one of the scariest environmental impacts of coal mining is the threat of acid rain. The high acidity of AMD remains in the water supply even through evaporation and condensation, which enables it to stay in the atmosphere and eventually return in the form of "acid rain", thus perpetuating the cycle of pollution.

Perhaps what we have paid very little attention to is the impact of radiation. Scientists tell us that coal contains trace elements of radium and uranium, which, when released into the environment, can lead to radioactive contamination. While it's true that these elements occur in small amounts, the burning of coal in coke units produces dangerous levels of

radioactive waste. The most dangerous impact of coal mining is on Climate Change because high levels of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, is released during the mining process, contributing to the destruction of the ozone layer. Carbon dioxide, another greenhouse gas, is buried in the combustion (burning) process, when coal is used to fuel cement plants or to produce coke. Hence global warming is one of the most significant ways in which the environmental effects of coal mining.

The poor people that the MLA of Singu-Saipung speaks of need better access to health care. In so many decades of wealth collection how and where did the coal lobby utilise their corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds? Have they visited the areas where Lafarge mines limestone and do they see the number of roads and footpaths constructed; water supply system augmented; medical equipment donated to PHCs; school buildings constructed and several state of the art community halls have been constructed and provided with furniture? Livelihood opportunities are being created and countless other socially and economically beneficial interventions.

Let the coal lobby name even one school they have started and maintained or even supported? It has been a purely selfish endeavour and now they dare to speak of the poor? What have they done to benefit the poor thus far? When hypocrisy speaks among the Assembly it sounds gross and deceptive. Hence a woman legislator with no commitment to society and its well-being is of no consequence. Merely being a woman and an MLA does not mean that she represents women's empowerment which is about empowering other women and charting out a new future for them away from the dependence on a non-sustainable, extractive economy.

What will provide them with knowledge and mould their character. In every library there should be a Children's Section, Reading Circles among the children. Specified children columns in newspapers and magazines with the provision of attractive illustrations and prizes for good articles and poems need to be provided. In some cities I have come across 'Book Cafes', a new culture where one can enjoy reading a book over a complimentary cup of coffee which I think is a very innovative idea. Unless and until there is a sustainable urge created among our children for reading books and enough facilities of books in place to fulfill their demand, plus social recognition and enough remuneration to encourage the young minds it is hard to motivate the children to read books. It is, therefore, to the credit that we rise to the occasion.

Yours etc.,  
KK Mukton  
(MCS Retired),  
Via email

bridge. One would like to remind the Government that the Umiam bridge is our lifeline. Alongside the audi, can the Government seriously consider the construction of a new bridge over the Umiam Lake? This is a serious matter and the Government must deliberate on this matter and get into action. At the same time, one hopes that the Opposition Members will wake the Government up from time to time so that the matter moves at a smarter pace.

Yours etc.,  
Junifer Wkhar,  
Via email

**Motivating the reading habit**

Editor,  
I am glad to read the letter of Dr. Omranin Kyndiah captioned - "Reading habit on the decline", in your esteemed daily dated January 26, 2023. Reading of extra-curricular books by students is an important habit that should be cultivated by every student. Reading of books helps in widening their knowledge and building a good character. For "reading makes a person wise and wisdom teaches him to be humble". Our parents and

teachers should always encourage their wards to read books from their childhood so that it develops into a permanent habit. To do this, it is not enough to simply tell the children to read books, or to bring home a basket full of books. This may, on the contrary, scare them away and breed a sense of hatred towards books. The method of paying two dollars to students for every book read by them, as stated to have been practised in Dallas, is not correct either. We need first to motivate the children to read books of their interest and create an urge in them to learn new things and then to gradually instil the habit of reading in them. In modern days there are many agents of distraction for children: watching TV, using smart phones, jostling on social media are strong attractions to resist for children. As stated by Dr Omranin Kyndiah, nowadays the reading habit of youth has declined very much. As a result, bad elements in society are gaining ground, acts of violence and vandalism are increasing. Hence there is an urgent need for a conscious and well-guided process to be taken up in schools as well as societies to induce the children to the habit of reading books.

Yours etc.,  
KK Mukton  
(MCS Retired),  
Via email

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**The "real" reforms no one is talking about**

By G N Bajpai

The nation is going through a tough debate on the merits of a new pension scheme versus the old scheme that offered defined benefits to retirees. There is much pull for reservation and quotas for newer groups based on various criteria. And the government faced serious opposition for reworking the scheme for hiring jawans on short tenures. In each of these, and many other similar situations, the tension is about a cash-strapped government being asked to hand out solutions and salaries on an unending basis, harking back to the days when governments were looked up to as providers rather than enablers. "Competitive Populism" is over taking "Fiscal Prudence". The economic reforms were supposed to have changed that but they clearly didn't, given the way our reforms have panned out. So now, we hear of "second generation" reforms -- more opening up more withdrawal of government from services and more dependence on private players under liberalised frameworks. But the root question that remains unasked is simple: Why do we think economic reforms, version 2.0, will deliver when the first round under an experienced economist like Dr. Manmohan Singh fell short?

Here, we need to turn the focus to bigger questions -- on the readiness and robustness of our institutions, the quality of our governance systems and the mindsets with which these systems operate to deliver to the needs of our institutions. It is time to look at the biggest of these systems and reform or fix them, before we can unleash any new round of reforms. Good governance after all is at the root of any system that thrives to the benefit of all its members, and this is as much true for small groups as it is for a large society or a nation state. Today, there are many questions on our governance standards, leading to the big question of the day: Have we met the promise with which India became a free nation 75 years ago and continued itself into a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic?

As Dr. Bhabha's book *Ambedkar had pointed out right in the Constituent Assembly*, "... however good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to execute it, happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are called to work it, happen to be a good lot". In the same speech, he warned against "hero worship", and the "grammar of anarchy", and of the dangers of equality written down in the Constitution but the reality of all-pervading inequality in social and economic life.

How have we stood up to these threats over the years? Are our governance standards being strengthened or are they falling behind and failing us? It might be useful to undertake a comprehensive and dispassionate review of where the nation stands after 75 years of independence in terms of delivering justice, liberty, equality and fraternity -- the watchwords of our Constitution.

has a dashboard of pending cases; it shows a pendency of 42.7 million cases, over 70% of them over a year old as of March 2023.

Consider the civic administration, which facilitates the quality of life, living and opportunity. The common man is aggrieved by the functioning of the civic administration. It is clear that the 'haves' gather disproportionate resources and opportunities and the 'have-nots' have to struggle to be treated equally. This applies to providing of social infrastructure like water, sanitation, health education et al. as also for pursuing a vocation and profession. We see an imbalance of facilities between slum and non-slum populations even in gritty urban centres like Mumbai. The poor suffer, visibly and in many other invisible ways, with lack of adequate services in water, sanitation, cleanliness, access roads etc.

Similarly, the treatment of the common man by the police administration to ensure the safety of life, liberty and property are unequal. People with means and resources often get away with misdemeanours, even heinous ones, and the ordinary person is subjected ill-treatment and harassment. Violence against women is deeply embedded in the police system. Any institutional framework that authorises and delegates power to men who have a multitude of biases, lacks of transparency, accountability and cognisance of inefficiency conduct become facilitators of mal administration. First, the police administration to ensure the safety of life, liberty and property are unequal. People with means and resources often get away with misdemeanours, even heinous ones, and the ordinary person is subjected ill-treatment and harassment. Violence against women is deeply embedded in the police system. 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"Without a sense of urgency, desire loses its value."

— Jim Rohn

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Long before 'foreign soil', there was the ubiquitous 'foreign hand'...

Ironically, the person who filed the defamation suit in a Surat court only happens to have the surname Modi...

Political parties should stick to issues and leave the personal attacks as long as a person's personal character handicaps do not affect his/her performance...

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Look beyond Shillong please

The neo-colonialism in the current Budget Session of the Meghalaya Assembly gives an impression that Meghalaya is Shillong and Shillong is Meghalaya...

Problems galore with Post Office & Banks

The Laban Post Office which is operating from the campus of GPO, Shillong since "time immemorial" was hit by a link failure from Monday...

Politics behind a Rahul Gandhi apology

By Rajdeep Sardesai

Long before 'foreign soil', there was the ubiquitous 'foreign hand'...

Mr Gandhi's 'democracy is under attack' contention, a constant refrain of the Congress leader with far-reaching implications...

Unless the Modi government too believes in adapting an Indira Gandhi era sycophantic slogan to a 'new' India: Modi is India and India is Modi...

In the face of a 'world without boundaries' framework, one which India hopes to spearhead as part of a less-divided new world order...

upon India's soft power as an oasis of democratic stability in an increasingly chaotic world...

The 'foreign soil' controversy is then only a contrived debate for the BJP and the Modi government...

Mr Gandhi has made an 'anti-India' statement. Unless the Modi government too believes in adapting an Indira Gandhi era sycophantic slogan to a 'new' India: Modi is India and India is Modi...

Mr Gandhi has made an 'anti-India' statement. Unless the Modi government too believes in adapting an Indira Gandhi era sycophantic slogan to a 'new' India: Modi is India and India is Modi...

All things are corrupt to the corrupt

By Gregory F Shullia

Finally someone, Jai Ram Ramesh Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) Chairman Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science and

"Most Corrupt State in the Country," vide his letter dt 21st Mar 2023 addressed to Director Central Bureau of Investigation (circulated on WhatsApp)...

Technology, Environment, Forests, and Climate Change, has followed up on the ignoble dubbing that stamped Meghalaya as the 'Most Corrupt State in the Country'...

The people of the State were finally accepting Mr Gandhi's style of leadership. And finally, it emerges the BJP's core support in their constant search of an 'anti-national' hate figure...

"We know we have our faults, most of them embarrassing; we believe that we are to live by 'the sweat of the brow' and we believe in forgiveness and in this belief our conscience is clear; but without developing a haec conscience, without learning to be profoundly dissatisfied with ourselves and our way of life, we cannot envisage higher norms and higher ideals and so we can never attain a higher state of self-perfection."

hands and that the only formula for remaining sane was to accept what was handed out... not wanting anything different, not looking forward for help, not glancing backward with regret and not even hoping for a form of deliverance...

I think we know better than anyone else what tremendous things we are capable of. There is not only the most "corrupt State" of the country nor only the "best performing" State in the country...



A photograph of a man, likely a politician, speaking at a podium.

Unless the Modi government too believes in adapting an Indira Gandhi era sycophantic slogan to a 'new' India: Modi is India and India is Modi...

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Traffic overflow

What happens when many rivers flow to a small sea? This is happening in Shillong City All roads converge at Khyndi Lal and Molphran and these two places are overflowing...

Calculated aversion for English or calculated imposition of Hindi?

Editor, Apropos of the letter 'Aversion to Hindi as a language' (ST March 23, 2023), I fully resonate with the writer that the more lan-

A collage of images and text related to the 'Most Corrupt State' article, including a map of Meghalaya and various headlines.

# Ramadan and Eid in Abu Dhabi: A unique experience

The Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi (DCT Abu Dhabi) is inviting residents and visitors to experience Ramadan with a vibrant and unique calendar of authentic and inspiring activities across the emirate.

The start of Ramadan, that is expected to begin 23 March, will coincide with the term break from schools. Abu Dhabi is preparing to welcome and share Ramadan with visitors from around the world, inviting them to discover experiences at their own pace. Attractions, restaurants and retail outlets will remain open throughout the day, though once the sun sets, the spirit of Ramadan in Abu Dhabi comes alive.

From Iftar to Suhoor, festivals and pop-ups at the city's hotels, restaurants and attractions, there are no shortage of options for spaces to gather and celebrate the holy month with family and friends. With more announcements coming soon, we have selected a shortlist of dining, family and retail experience that will make this year's Ramadan one to remember.

## RETAIL: RAMADAN POP-UPS

**The First Fendi Majlis in the Region:** FENDI takes over Abu Dhabi's tashas Al Bateen for the holy month to host their very own Ramadan Majlis. Surrounded by the iconic codes of the FENDI Maison, the Majlis welcomes the community to gather family and friends every evening for Suhoor. Starting from 26 March, and for the entire month, this especially unique concept will surely be the most glamorous evening in the region. Make it a must to visit this one-off experience which includes a mouth-watering menu curated by tashas exclusively for Fendi.

**Charlotte Tilbury Majlis:** The First Charlotte Tilbury Majlis in the Region will welcome guests from 6 - 17 April with a specially curated and iconic Charlotte Tilbury Ramadan cafe in the heart of Abu Dhabi. Taking over Sacis in Mamsha Saadiyat, this luxury F&B concept offers a memorable Ramadan experience with consumer-led exclusive masterclasses hosted by Regional and Global Make-up artists, gaming opportunities as well as product discoveries.

**Ehr Take Over by Dypique:** From the chic streets of Paris, to paradise in Abu Dhabi, Dypique, the pioneering parfumerie Maison, will bring to life a mesmerising, first of its kind cafe takeover at Ehr, a hidden gem in Abu Dhabi located in Mamsha Saadiyat. Offering visitors the chance to discover new and exciting fragrance collection Eau Nabati, and flavours that weave through the exotic and the magical surroundings. Friends of the brand, perfume connoisseurs and beauty enthusiasts will also be able to appreciate the Layali Ramadan Campaign event further thanks to a series of creative workshops that will be taking place over 14 days, to unveil the special Dypique scent launch of Eau Nabati. The Ehr Take Over by Dypique runs from 5 - 22 April.

**RITUALS Wellness Retreat:** As a pre Ramadan event, the wellness brand RITUALS COSMETICS will be hosting a rejuvenating wellness getaway from 16 - 19 March at the magnificent Park Hyatt in Abu Dhabi. This 4-day retreat will allow you to immerse yourself into the World of Rituals and indulge in sound meditation, manifestation workshops and fragrance zoning to get your mind, body and home ready for Ramadan.

**The Ramadan Market:** In collaboration with the home-grown brand Mirbad, Retail Abudhabi will host the first Ramadan night retail market in the emirate from 24 - 27 March at Manarat Al Saadiyat, where over 100 local and global vendors will showcase and host different brand experiences. For the first time, the Ramadan market will be embedding interactive brands and adding to their programming entertainment. The Ramadan Market will give visitors a chance to immerse themselves in the local culture with a modern twist.

## AUTHENTIC ARABIAN HOSPITALITY

The Majlis by the Sea at Emirates Palace Mandarin Oriental: The Emirates Palace Mandarin Oriental presents The Majlis by the Sea, a Ramadan tent uniquely situated by the Arabian Gulf. With glittering views across the Abu Dhabi skyline, this Arabian-inspired contemporary tent offers luxury hospitality, serving world-class Arabic and Michelin-starred cuisine and live Arabic musical entertainment. The Iftar buffet, daily from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm, is priced at AED 325 per person, and Suhoor, from 10:00 pm to 2:00 am priced with a minimum spend of AED 175.

Iftar and Suhoor Under the Stars at Rosewood Abu Dhabi: Celebrate Iftar and Suhoor against a magnificent backdrop of the city and under the stars at the Rosewood Abu Dhabi. For Iftar, Aqua has curated an enchanting gastronomic offering with magical flavours, sure to enchant guests each evening from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm. Suhoor Under the Stars, from 10:30 pm to 3:00 am, shares a night to remember at Glo with its a la carte Suhoor menu being served al fresco on its beautiful terrace with views over the sparkling waters of Al Maryah Island. With additional Ramadan exclusive stay rates also available, the magical sunset Iftar is AED 275 during the first week of Ramadan and AED 295 per person after that. Suhoor Under the Stars is priced at a la carte.

Ramadan at Rixos Premium Saadiyat Island: This Ramadan offers plenty at the Rixos Premium Saadiyat Island with exceptional Suhoor and Iftar experiences offering authentic atmosphere and sumptuous food across its outlets. From the all-day dining venue, Turquoise, to a serene beachfront Suhoor at Mermaid and Ottoman experience at Orient, families and friends can gather together to break their fast: daily from 6:00 pm to 10:30 pm.

Guests can avail of the Iftar Buffet at AED 299 per person and the Suhoor Buffet at AED 200 per person, both including Arabic juices, soft beverages, tea or coffee and water.

**Ramadan Village at Shangri-La:** This Ramadan, Shangri-La Qaryat Al Beri invites guests to join them in the spirit of togetherness among traditional Arabian hospitality at the Ramadan Village. Dining with panoramic views of the Khor Al Maqia creek, the Shangri-La Ramadan Village serves up a Suhoor to remember with immersive experiences, seasonal-inspired culinary stations, fresh juice bars, speciality coffee carts and authentic entertainment. Price packages start at AED 100 minimum spend per person for standard and lounge seating, AED 500 minimum spend for a Suhoor Majlis for up to 5 people and AED 1,500 minimum spend to reserve the Grand Majlis up to 15 people. Opening on the 22nd of March and ideal for groups and social gatherings, the month-long festivities at the Ramadan Village begins with the exclusive 'Culinary Master Series' with Michelin-awarded Chef Greg Maulof presenting a four-course menu for Suhoor during the first week of Ramadan. The four-course menu

celebrate Iftar with a generous 13-dish Michelin-star menu.

Ramadan at the Louvre Abu Dhabi: Whilst the iconic Louvre Abu Dhabi remains closed on Mondays, throughout Ramadan, the museum has extended its hours from 10:00 am to midnight on Tuesdays to Sundays, allowing more time to soak up world-class arts and culture. Inside, the galleries close at 6:30 pm on weekdays (Tuesday to Thursday) and 8:30 pm on weekends (Friday to Sunday). After sunset, the Louvre Abu Dhabi offers individual and private group dining options. Aptitude Cafe serves up specialised evenings throughout the week, with an authentic three-course set Iftar menu, at AED 165 per person, of middle eastern and international cuisines from 6:00 pm to 10:30 pm on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. On Thursdays and Fridays, from 6:00 pm to 11:00 pm, the cafe hosts an a la carte celebration of Mediterranean street food and regional souk cultures with Manoushe Nights, and on Tuesdays, from the 28th of March onwards, from 6:00 pm to 11:00 pm, an a la carte, Ramadan-inspired pizzas menu.

Elsewhere at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Fouquet's

close-and-personal feeding experience and photo opportunity.

Ramadan at the Warner Bros Hotel Abu Dhabi: From authentic Arabic dishes to the cosy Ramadan-themed ambience and even meet-and-greets with renowned WB characters, including Tom & Jerry, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and Robin, Ramadan at the WB Abu Dhabi is sure to be a memorable experience for all the family. Taking place at Sidekicks restaurant from 6:00 pm to 10:00 pm each evening, the Iftar will combine authentic traditions with modern flair, with an array of authentic and lavish Levantine cuisine.

Ramadan at the Oasis: The Al Ain Oasis will host its ever-popular Ramadan Nights at the Oasis from 10:00 pm to 1:00 am each evening from 1 - 15 April, hosting a series of cultural activities, entertainment and live TV broadcast.

Ramadan Arcade: Taking place at Manarat Al Saadiyat from 6 - 16 April from 9:00 pm to 2:00 am, Ramadan Arcade returns this Ramadan to embrace cultural traditions in a contemporary setting with a fantastic round-up of cultural activities, a variety of entertainment and music, art, games, workshops and more, making it the ultimate hang out spot in Ramadan!

Pixoul Ramadan Nights: Every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday throughout Ramadan, Pixoul Gaming, located in Al Qana, hosts a rare Suhoor experience with activities designed to bring families and friends together. From 10:00 pm to 3:00 am, the immersive gaming Suhoor experience allows guests to meet with the local gaming community, play vintage Arcade games, save Planet Pixoul with a VR experience, and show off skills at the Esports Hub, all whilst enjoying refreshments from the E-Sports Bar.

A Reflection on Cultural Heritage at Louvre Abu Dhabi: From 15 February to 15 May, 6:30 pm to midnight daily, the Concrete Beach of the Louvre Abu Dhabi is set to stun with mesmerising projections seen from the Promenade. Iconic images of Emirati heritage will come alive on the seafloor surfaces with projections of cultural activities and traditions from maritime moments and desert travellers, urban and rural landscapes and architecture and portraits of the people and lifestyle of the city.

## SPORTING SPECIALS

Science & Snuffel at Jubail Mangrove Park: This Ramadan, stay active and reconnect with nature at Jubail Mangrove Park. In addition to scenic boardwalk experiences through native wildlife to clear your mind and detoxify your body, the environmentally-protected park is hosting various activities, yoga sessions and creative art classes. On the water, single or double kayaking guided experiences through mangroves, scenic stunning sunrises and sunsets whilst discovering native wildlife, or navigating the night with the newly-launched Night Glow experience, are specially curated. LED-lit kayaks, Promoting spiritual reflection, Jubail Mangrove Park has curated a schedule of ladies-only yoga practices every Monday from 8:30 pm to 9:30 pm, including a Detox Flow with Sound Healing Journey, Yin with Roll & Release, Detox Pilates to Reset and Breath and Meditation.

Ramadan at the Circuit Yas Marina Circuit is hosting an array of adrenaline-packed activities, from driving packages to thrilling Ramadan Karting Cup and Yas Super Street Challenge, the ADNOC Train Yas Ramadan Challenge presented by ADCC encouraging guests to stay active over Ramadan and be in for a chance of winning some fantastic prizes.

Hudayriyat Mar Vista: With something for all ages, tastes and interests, be sure to visit Hudayriyat Island this Ramadan. The 90-spot island destination boasts everything you will need for a great day or night out, with ample indoor and outdoor attractions such as cycling and biking trails and trails, obstacle parks and pristine beaches, restaurants and food trucks and the cultural Hudayriyat Heritage Trail.

Wellness Iftar at Pura Eco Resort: Disconnect from the world around you and be engulfed by nature with Pura Eco Resorts' unique Wellness Iftar. Over two weekends with limited spaces available, the extensive Ramadan programme will include a series of yoga and meditation classes before coming together to break fast with a delicious and healthy Iftar designed by Emirati Chef Faisal Al Harmond. Hosted on 31 March and 1, 7 and 8 April, the sessions promise guests moments of reflection and connection with their inner selves set in the stunning surroundings of Pura Eco Resort.

## FIREWORK FLOURISHES & EXHILRATING EID CELEBRATIONS

Kicking off the Eid celebrations, Abu Dhabi's citizens, residents and visitors will be dazzled by fireworks lighting up the skies across the city from 9:00 pm with shows along the Abu Dhabi Corniche, at Al Ain's Alazza Stadium and Madinat Zayed Public Park, Gayathi and Al Marfa's AlMugheirah beach in the Al Dhafra region.

Music lovers can revel in the sounds of the most iconic stars from the Arab world with special concerts hosted at Etihad Arena on the second day of Eid. Concerts, with details and artists yet to be announced, will also occur on the same evening in Al Ain and Al Dhafra.

Throughout the Eid public holiday, activations will be hosted by iconic tourists and cultural attractions, including Yas Bay Waterfront, Yas Island, Manarat Al Saadiyat and Qsar Al Hosn. Al Ain's Palace Museum will see special Al Ayyala and Al Razfa performances, with Al Ain Oasis and Qsar Al Muwajj also hosting yet-to-be-announced celebrations across the four days. (IANS/Ifar)



Ramadan at The Liwa Tent Four Seasons Hotel: As the sun sets over Al Maryah Island, the spirit of Ramadan shines at The Four Seasons Hotel Abu Dhabi. Experience the essence of Ramadan at the Four Seasons Abu Dhabi Liwa Tent, with flavourful five-star Iftar and Suhoor menus that can be taken indoors or in the open air under the night sky. At AED 310 per person, the experience will tantalise your tastebuds and offer additional traditional entertainment with a wide selection of aromatic shisha and captivating live performances.

Ramadan at one of the city's Michelin Stars: Abu Dhabi is a hotspot for cultural and culinary excellence. With an impressive line-up of Michelin Star recognised restaurants, why not spend the evening dining on a world-renowned Ramadan offering? With leading chef's curating Iftar menus for the holy month, guests can make reservations for a truly traditional touch at Tazal on A Qana Walk or Layali Al Haraka at Jumeirah Hotel at Etihad Towers. For those looking for a more modern twist on international cuisines, the Galleria Al Maryah Island's COYA offers up an immersive 360-degree Peruvian experience, whilst Mamsha Al Saadiyat's homegrown Niri Restaurant serves up Japanese cuisine and spirit and the Punjab Grill at the Venetian Village at The Ritz-Carlton Abu Dhabi, Grand Canal share an authentic Indian six-course tasting menu from Chef Sandeep Ail.

LPM Abu Dhabi at the Galleria Al Maryah Island promises a succulent Ramadan transporting guests somewhere else, far away in time and place, and 99 Sushi Bar & Restaurant at the Four Seasons Hotel Abu Dhabi at Al Maryah Island invites guests to

Abu Dhabi will host a traditional Iftar menu with French twists on firm favourites such as lentil soup with truffle foam and gougeres and sharing-style mezze plates of roasted cauliflower bavaroise, eggplant confit, pine nut burrata and cucumber salad and Cecina de Leon Snails Provençal. The menu is available all day, daily, for AED 390 per person. Offering privacy, larger groups can book the three-course Iftar menu at the Museum Cafe for AED 245 per person or, for corporate groups, the Art Lounge offers both an Iftar and Suhoor menu, with flexibility on timings based on client requirements. The Iftar menu is priced at AED 245 per person and offers full privatisation, whilst the Suhoor menu is priced at AED 195 per person, with full privatisation at an additional fee.

## AWE-INSPIRING ACTIVATIONS

Underwater Iftar by Shangri-La at the National Aquarium: The National Aquarium, in partnership with Shangri-La Qaryat Al Beri, Abu Dhabi, is hosting a one-of-a-kind 'underwater' Iftar evening with unparalleled access to the National Aquarium for groups between 30 to 50 guests. Taking place from the 10 - 11 April, business partners, family or friends can come together in the spectacular setting and connect over an elevated Iftar offering from the culinary team at Shangri-La, showcasing flavours from across the region, including traditional Arabian-influenced dishes and tempting sweet delights. This exclusive experience requires booking at least 48 hours in advance and is priced at AED 600 per person.

SALT Camp at Louvre Abu Dhabi: UAE home-grown favourite SALT will pitch its 'tent' this Ramadan with the Salt Camp pop-up at Louvre Abu Dhabi. From 1 March to 21 April, SALT Camp presents a space for friends and family to meet and enjoy the laidback menu favourites against a backdrop of SALT-inspired activities and activations.

Iftar with the Lions and Giraffes at Al Ain Zoo: From 23 March to 21 April, go wild this Ramadan with an Iftar with the lions and giraffes at Al Ain Zoo. Both Iftar settings promise an evening to remember, bringing guests and their loved ones next to exciting wildlife in the world's largest man-made African Safari setting. Iftar with the Lions sees a breath-taking Iftar moment with the king of the jungle, whilst Iftar with the Giraffes sees visitors dining with Miss Zafarana the Giraffe and her family after the sunset, and even an up-

# 20 years on, George W. Bush's promise of democracy in Iraq, Middle East falls short

By Brian Lirischer

President George W. Bush and his administration put forward a variety of reasons to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In the months before the U.S. invasion, Bush said the looming conflict was about eradicating terrorism and seizing weapons of mass destruction, but also because of a "freedom deficit" in the Middle East, a reference to the perceived lag in participatory government in the region.

Many of these arguments would emerge as poorly grounded, given later events.

In 2004, then Secretary of State Colin Powell reflected on the weak rationale behind the main arguments for the invasion: that there were weapons of mass destruction. He acknowledged that "it turned out that the sourcing was inaccurate and wrong and in some cases deliberately misleading."

In fact Iraq did not have a stockpile of weapons of mass destruction, as Powell and others had alleged at the time.

But the Bush administration's rhetoric of building a more free, open and democratic Middle East persisted after the weapons of mass destruction claim had proven false, and has been harder to evaluate — at least in the short term.

Bush assured the American public in 2003 that, "A new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region."

He focused on this theme during the ground invasion, in which a coalition force of nearly 100,000 American and other allied troops rapidly toppled Saddam Hussein's regime.

"The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution," Bush said in November 2003. He also said that the U.S. would be pursuing a "forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East."

Twenty years on, it is worth considering how this "forward strategy" has played out both in Iraq and across the Middle East. The 2003 invasion was indeed, as Bush noted, a "freedom deficit" in the Middle East, where repressive authoritarian regimes dominated the region. Yet, in spite of tremendous upheaval in the Middle East over the past two decades, many authoritarian regimes remain deeply entrenched.

### MEASURING THE 'FREEDOM GAP'

Political science scholars like myself try to measure the democratic or authoritarian character



of governments in a variety of ways.

The non-profit group Freedom House evaluates countries in terms of democratic institutions and whether they have free and fair elections, as well as people's civil rights and liberties, such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and a free press. Freedom House rates each country and its level of democracy on a scale from 2 to 14, from "mostly free" to "least free."

One way to think about the level of democracy in the region is to focus on the 23 countries and governments that form the Arab League, a regional organization that spans North Africa, the Red Sea coast and the Middle East. In 2003, the average Freedom House score for an Arab League member was 11.45 — far more authoritarian than the global average of 6.75 at the time.

Put another way, the Freedom House report in 2003 classified a little over 45% of all countries as "free," but no country in the Arab League met that threshold.

While some Arab countries, like Saudi Arabia, were ruled by monarchies around this time, others, like Libya, were ruled by dictators.

both with popular legitimacy and with practical aspects of governance, such as providing basic education for children.

Indeed, in 2023, Freedom House continues to score Iraq as "Not Free" in its measure of democracy.

Since the U.S. military withdrawal in 2011, Iraq has lurched from one political crisis to another. From 2014 to 2017, large portions of western Iraq were controlled by the extremist Islamist Islamic State group.

In 2018 and 2019, rampant government corruption led to a string of anti-government protests, which sparked a violent crackdown by the government.

The protests prompted early parliamentary elections in November 2021, but the government has not yet been able to create a coalition government representing all competing political groups.

While Iraq's most recent crisis avoided descending into civil war, the militarized nature of Iraqi political parties poses an ongoing risk of electoral violence.

### THE POST-INVASION MIDDLE EAST

While Iraq continues to face deep political challenges, it is worth considering the U.S. efforts at regional democracy promotion more fully.

In 2014, widespread protest movements associated with the Arab Spring toppled dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya. In other countries, such as Morocco and Jordan, monarchs were able to offer concessions to people and remain in control by delaying public spending cuts, for example, and replacing government ministers.

Yet sustaining stable democracies has proved challenging even where the Arab Spring seemed to succeed in changing political regimes. In Egypt, the military has reasserted itself and the country has slid steadily back to authoritarianism. In Yemen, the political vacuum created by the protests marked the start of a devastating civil war.

The average Freedom House democracy score for members of the Arab League is today 11.45 — the same as it was on the eve of the Iraq invasion.

It is hard to know if U.S. efforts at democracy promotion accelerated or delayed political change in the Middle East. It is hard to know if a different approach might have yielded better results. Yet the data — at least as social scientists measure such things — strongly suggests that the vision of an Iraq as an inspiration for a democratic transformation of the Middle East has not come to pass.

(The Conversation)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajaal Bhambi

Sunday, MARCH 26, 2023

**'Birthday Forecasts'**  
Moon seen square Mercury on your star return chart and it is going to be a fantastic year! You will be full with your own abilities in the new year. You will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do.

**'This week for you'**  
**Aries (March 21 - April 20)** You will discharge your responsibilities. You will think of your job duties. You will establish a balance between your home and office. You will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do.

**Taurus (April 21 - May 21)** It will be a normal week. You will be working under pressure. There will be pressure on you to achieve your targets at work. Financially you will be in a strong position. You will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do.

**Gemini (May 22 - June 21)** You desired things will be achieved. It will make you feel cheerful and happy. You will overcome unexpected hurdles that come your way. Someone may try to frustrate your great plans in business but you will manage the situation well. You may take a loan to meet your business demands. You will not worry about personal problems come in your way in your work. You will ensure that your personal problems get resolved. Success will remain devoted to their studies. Those appearing in exams will pass with great success. Avoid confrontation and debates with your colleagues. Slowly and gradually your business problems will get resolved. Market satisfaction will see you get supremacy in your work field. Your own self will remain happy.

**Cancer (June 22 - July 22)** Your colleagues and subordinates will help you complete complicated job. Your reputation and honor will get a boost in society. Those who are in politics, media and social network will get lots of fame and attention. You will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do.

**Leo (July 23 - Aug 23)** Aug 23 is going to be a wonderful week. You will get a gift or a reward. Success will be forthcoming in all that you do. You will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do.

**Virgo (August 24 - September 23)** You will have a favorable phase this week. Success in competitive exams is indicated. You will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do.

**Libra (September 24 - October 23)** You will work with a sincerity and devotion. You will get promoted in your job. You will focus on your business and will manage it efficiently. You will work with sincerity and will complete your work in style. You will make a lot of pending work and will finish off with much success in priority. You will develop your personality. You will get lot of fame and fame. There will be an increase in material possessions and increase in your life. Love will be a great time. Love relations will continue to flourish. Do not have any decision under the influence of emotions if you are feeling low and tired in your life.

**Scorpio (October 24 - November 23)** The corolla comes problems if at you were facing in your past but now it will come to an end. Thus your pending work will get completed with the cooperation of all those who matter a lot. Most of your time will be spent in laughing and fun activities. You will get a good feedback from people who matter most.

**Sagittarius (November 24 - December 23)** It is something big that is about to take place in your life. You could get promoted to a high position or be commissioned in a major competitive exam. A meeting with an eminent person will open the doors of success for you. At work, you will make plans and work accordingly. Success will be achieved with your hard work. Some complex issues may crop up at your workplace but you will solve it with your intelligence and discretion. You will have loving relations with your life partner. Your respect and dignity will increase. You will get a big order in your business. You will be having no financial problems. You will get a chance to meet some well known person or celebrity. You will be happy about your career and will give attention to your studies.

**Capricorn (December 24 - January 23)** You will move on the road to success this week. Your future is bright and you will be able to do what you want to do. You will get full cooperation of your colleagues. You will complete your work with ease. People will admire your intelligence and good behavior. Those who are cautious of your progress and popularity will not matter to you. A big achievement will be yours and happiness in your life and will make you feel secure and content. The understanding between husband and wife will be good. You will be happy with your performance. You will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do.

**Aquarius (January 24 - February 23)** Something will bother you this week. Although it is about some wrong decision or bad words exchanged with someone will be present in your mind. Otherwise, you will make plans for things done by you. But after deep reflection it will be a good thing. Positive changes have occurred in your past and they will remain the same for you. Now you need to focus on your work and business. You will have loving relations with your family members. You will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do.

**Pisces (February 24 - March 23)** If results are not forthcoming don't bother yourself. Have patience. Your luck will turn for the good. You will be working as usual. You will not lack in wealth and prosperity. You will prefer to have a devoted companion than people who matter a lot. You will have much more authority than before in your job duties. Financially you will be able to do what you want to do. You will be able to do what you want to do.

## The varied emotions of a city

### Parks stress men and narrow streets stress women

There are many people who have experienced fear or stress on the street at one time or another. There are also those who go out to relax or disconnect from their home or work lives. The place is the same, but the experiences are clearly different. Despite the fact that the street is an important space in our lives, we don't really know why it brings about positive emotions in some people and negative emotions in others.

Many municipalities have invested significant amounts of money to "clean up", "improve" and "modernise" their streets, squares and parks. This generally means changing the urban layout, increasing the number of fixtures on the street or adding plants.

But, in reality, these are merely formal interventions: the extent to which they improve the emotions that people experience in public spaces has not been studied.

### Identifying emotions

Traditionally, emotions have been identified through surveys. This approach has some problems. The main issue is that people lie, whether consciously or unconsciously. They also forget things, don't want to admit that something scares them or fail to fill out the questionnaire correctly.

A new method was needed. And that has been possible in recent years thanks to the miniaturisation (and falling cost) of some medical devices. Now, people can move around in the street with instruments that measure their emotions.

One indicator of these is heart rate. When we say that someone has a heart rate of 60 beats per minute, it could be deduced that the time between beats is one second. But actually, during those 60 seconds, the frequency of each beat varies to accommodate the changes the person is going through. Measuring these variations makes it possible to identify changes in the emotions experienced throughout the day. The intervals between beats can be measured with instruments like the heart rate bands that athletes use. If this information is correlated to a specific location (for example, with the GPS of a mobile phone), we can know which locations are associated with heartbeat alterations and look for possible causes.

### Different reactions depending on gender

Heart rate changes reveal some significant differences in how groups of people experience public space. For example, they make it possible to identify changes in the perception of space by gender. In one of the first tests carried out to identify these changes, which took place in the historic center of Lisbon (Spain), the results showed that women experienced a degree of stress that is 17.34% higher than men throughout the experiment. In addition, 20.51% of female participants rated some of the spaces visited as "unpleasant", compared to 8.6% of males. Likewise, significant differences were identified in the spaces that brought about



these emotions.

Women tended to have higher levels of stress in narrow pedestrian streets, especially if there were other people or parked vehicles creating areas with poor visibility. In contrast, men were more stressed by parks, gardens and shopping streets with a high presence of people.

Something curious was observed precisely in parks and gardens. These places seemed to produce a feeling of wellbeing in women, while in men the common feeling was stress. This is an example of how the same place can be perceived differently by different groups.

It is also important to point out that, when identifying the emotions experienced throughout the experiment, women expressed fear and sadness more often than men. Men tended to express joy and rage.

### City planning based on emotions

With the COVID-19 pandemic, an increase in anxiety and fear of going outside was observed. Knowing the origin of these emotions allows us to know the causes of that situation and design public spaces that tackle the issue of the population's wellbeing and mental health. Small micro-spaces that we see each day like zebra crossings, narrow sidewalks and parked cars may be directly related to whether we feel good or bad in a public place. Thinking about them properly is essential to designing spaces that flow with — and not against — the population. (The Conversation)

"There is just one life for each of us: our own."  
—Euripides

The Shillong Times

Vol No LXV No. 221 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 27, 2023

Games before polls

THE fragmented Opposition, mostly led by powerful dynasts, was groping in the dark even as the next round of assembly polls and even the parliament elections are fast approaching. The central government was virtually on assault mode, targeting several key figures in the Opposition with a new frenzy. The icing on the cake for the ruling side came in the form of the "speedy" disqualification of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi from Parliament. These series of actions should have re-energized the Opposition to put up a façade of unity and take on the ruling BJP head on. Indications, however, are that this is wishful thinking. Note the lukewarm manner in which the non-Congress opposition protested against the events leading up to Rahul Gandhi's disqualification. They are there and yet not there with any kind of vehemence. This was time for them to provide a boost to Rahul Gandhi's sinking morale.

The way things were shaping up in recent weeks had the unmistakable stamp of a calculated offensive against the principal opposition party — the Congress. However, the Centre also hit two birds with one stone, arresting Delhi's deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia and tightening the noose around K Kavitha, daughter of Telangana chief minister Chandrababbar Naidu in what is branded as the Delhi liquor scam. Embarrassment on both Arvind Kejriwal and Rao is all too visible and both are wary; proof enough that the ED was not barking up the wrong tree. The UP opposition stalwarts are lying low and so is Mamata Banerjee caught in matters like the Bengal coal scam. Central agencies are also knocking at the doors of the Lulu family in Bihar. ED is investigating crucial matters related to leftist chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan though he has no national clout. Coming on top of all these is the predicament that the top leader of the principal opposition, Rahul Gandhi, has landed himself in.

Question now is, with as much baggage on the shoulders of the Opposition parties, how would these survive and thrive if they stand apart and spite each other. Assembly elections that would set the tone for the 2024 parliament polls are a watch. The BJP has retained power in Tripura and overall maintained some hold elsewhere in the North-East too in the recent polls, but the next round is crucial. The Congress hopes to retain Rajasthan and wrest power in Karnataka. Madhya Pradesh too might witness anti-incumbency trends. Yet, only a united opposition can hope to upset the BJP juggernaut at the national level for the reason that issues like 'Adani' might not give them the winning edge.

Letters to the Editor

Devaluation of legislative democracy!

I would like to refer to the news item under the heading "VPP to hit streets against roster system" (ST March 25, 2023). In this regard, Mr Ardent Basiaiwmoi, VPP MLA is justified in expressing his displeasure over the Speaker's decision to conclude the House proceedings without giving the members of Opposition an opportunity to discuss the roster system (an issue earlier listed for discussion) over the decision to truncate the Budget Session to 7 days, to reserve only 2 days for private Members' business and to restrict the timing only to 10 minutes for the members to take part in the debate on the Governor's address. Mr Basiaiwmoi is also right in his observation that the Government in doing all this is running away from its responsibilities.

However, looking at the big picture, we see that the trend to weaken legislative democracy started about three decades back and no political party, including the present Opposition (except the VPP) cannot shelve themselves from their acts

Meghalaya State Budget: Confusion galore

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

Last week the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance-20 tabled the first budget of its second term in office. Out of the 31 sectors listed in the budget, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) got the highest allocation with around 13,145 Crore rupees. This allocation becomes very important in light of the fact that Meghalaya was placed second from the bottom in the NEFT Aayog North Eastern Region, District SDG Index, Report and Dashboard Baseline Report 2021-22. Among districts, East Khasi Hills achieved the highest rank coming in the 57th position out of the 57 districts in the North East. Being an average rank this means that on some individual goals the performance was even worse. In fact, 91% of the districts in the State were in the Performer category which is the second last category in the SDG index. So the highest allocation to Sustainable Development Goals is a welcome sign and must be applauded. But looking at the other allocations in the budget particularly under Climate Change Goals and Organic and Natural Farming Policy, there is confusion as to what kind of activities are actually being funded for spending under Sustainable Development Goals.

To begin with allocation under Climate Change Goals is the third highest in the budget with 3412 Crore rupees being earmarked for the sector. Like elsewhere in the world, the impact of climate change is already apparent in the State. In 2022, Meghalaya experienced record rainfall with Mawsynram and Sohra breaking their previous records. This resulted in numerous landslides all over the state leading to loss of lives in some. Agriculture was also severely affected by the torrential rainfall with the yield of potato, an important crop especially in the Khasi Hills, being badly hit in many locations. With uncertainty of weather and extreme events frequently becoming more frequent, taking steps to combat climate change is extremely important. The inclusion of Climate Change Goals in the state Budget is therefore very timely.

The confusion, however, is that climate change is already a part of the SDG goals, viz., SDG 13: Climate Action whose aim is to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. So in effect this means that allocation for climate change has been made twice, once under Sustainable Development Goals and another under Climate Change Goals.

India's defamation laws outdated

Editor

Rahul Gandhi has been sentenced to two years in prison for "insulting" Prime Minister Modi, by asking, during the 2019 election campaign, why "all thieves have Modi as [their] common surname." Besides this defamation charge, he has also been expelled from parliament at a time when he may

at least 2-3 years. Then such farmers will be brought under a certification system which according to Section 10.4.5 will start from the second year onwards. These provisions clash with the traditional farming systems practiced by the indigenous farmers of Meghalaya, viz., jhum and bar-bur which are cultivated for a period of one and two-three years respectively and then allowed to remain fallow for a period of 5-6 years to more than 7-10 years. Hence, if strictly followed indigenous farmers in the State will lose out on the benefits of the Scheme. There is therefore a need to amend the National Guidelines to take into consideration the local farming systems. If this is done it will have many positive spillovers which will benefit other sectors and here lies the confusion as well.

One of the important benefits of the IPFS as practiced by the indigenous communities in Meghalaya through their local farming systems is in terms of climate resilience. This was unequivocally established by the 2021 The White Paper on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems published by Food and Agricultural Organisation which found that IPFS contributes to resilience to climate change in four ways, viz., insurance against resource failures; adaptation of food resources over longer time frames through evolutionary processes; encouraging positive symbiotic interactions between species and areas in the landscape that support nutrient cycling, control pests and disease, and reduce pollution; and sheltering the food system from the impact of ecological shocks. This is achieved through the genetic, species and system diversity found in the IPFS.

For example indigenous farmers practicing jhum cultivation in Meghalaya grow potato in the inter-cultured plots, viz., potato, sweet potato, taro, maize, tapioca, millet, job tears, cucumber, beans, perilla to name a few (Species Diversity). These crops have multiple landrace varieties (Genetic Diversity). A single farmer might grow only four to five varieties of potato but the entire community may be growing more than a dozen local varieties. Same is the case with the other species as well. In locations where jhum is not possible or required farmers practice hill wet paddy cultivation along with keeping a homestead garden

and collecting food from the forest and water bodies (Systems Diversity). This diversity of production is an important attribute of resilience required to strengthen the capacity of the food system to withstand the shocks of climate change. Furthermore, many of the species and their varieties grown by the indigenous farmers of Meghalaya are climate smart crops like millet which are known to be highly resilient to extreme weather conditions, a hallmark of climate change. It is, however, not the only one. Essentially this means that action taken under the Organic and Natural Farming Policy will have an impact on Climate Change Goals as well. But there is more.

As the IPFS found in Meghalaya follows the principle of natural farming it will affect SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production which aims to ensure sustainable consumption and (food) production patterns (i.e., organic and natural farming). Similarly, with diversity being an important feature of IPFS there will also be an impact on SDG 15 Life on Land which among other things wants to halt biodiversity loss (Species and Genetic Diversity). And finally, since 70% of the population in the State is rural and agriculture and allied activities contribute 19% to the state's GDP, livelihood built around IPFS will contribute to determine SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, i.e., the promotion of sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

However despite its immense importance, the allocation under Organic and Natural Farming Policy is just over 30,000 rupees per village, a very low figure. Also as was the case with the Climate Change Goals, adequate activities under Organic and Natural Farming Policy from those identified for Sustainable Development Goals is going to be very difficult. Not getting it right will lead to problems in terms of coordination and implementation resulting in wastage of scarce financial resources. With the National State Domestic Product of Meghalaya already being one of the lowest in the country, this is something the state cannot afford. Hopefully the elected representatives of the Opposition can raise these concerns with the government in their discussion on the Budget.

The writer can be reached at: mawroh.bhogtaram99@gmail.com

Walkout by VPP praiseworthy

Editor

The walkout by the members of the Voice of the Peo-

Rahul disqualification puts India in unenviable league of nations

Western media sees a jolt to credentials as largest democracy

By K Raveendran

Incumbent ruling dispensations disbanding former rulers and banning them for life from contesting elections is something that one often associates with countries with fragile democracies. Indians are used to news about politicians losing their seats in parliament and being debarred from contesting elections on account of corruption and other offences from across the border rather than in their own country, where such instances are rare if not non-existent. Rahul Gandhi losing his parliament seat and being disqualified from contesting elections for six years in view of his conviction in the defamation case has in the eyes of the world lowered India's prestige as the world's largest democracy.

Pakistan's deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif was a special mention of the fact that the decision to disqualify the Congress leader from parliament has been taken by the Indian parliament controlled by Modi's party.

BBC recalled how politicians including Rahul Gandhi had moved the Supreme Court for decriminalising defamation, which is based on the British law and pointed out that charge by free speech advocates that politicians have been using the law to silence their critics.

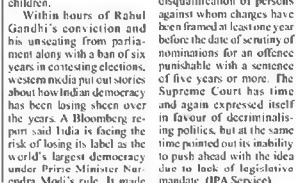
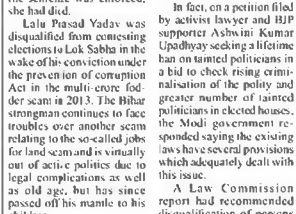
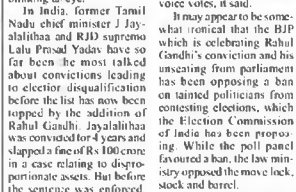
The Economist recently carried an article on India's "democratic drift", saying parliament was becoming increasingly irrelevant under the Modi administration as laws are passed without scrutiny and debate. It pointed out that the proportion

of bills referred to standing committees in the lower house, the Lok Sabha has dropped from around 60-70 percent under the previous government to 27 percent in Mr Modi's first term and just 13 percent in his second. Attendance records in committee meetings in both houses for the past three years reveal a meagre average of 46 percent. Of the 15 bills rushed in the monsoon session last year, not one had been deliberated in committee, and many were passed by perfunctory voice votes, it said.

It may appear to be somewhat ironic that the BJP which is celebrating Rahul Gandhi's conviction and his unseating from parliament has banned politicians from contesting elections, which the Election Commission of India has been proposing. While the poll panel favoured a ban, the law ministry opposed the move, lack, stock and barrel.

In fact, on a petition filed by activist lawyer and BJP supporter Ashwin Kumar Upadhyay seeking a lifetime ban on tainted politicians from contesting elections, which the Election Commission of India has been proposing, while the poll panel favoured a ban, the law ministry opposed the move, lack, stock and barrel.

A Law Commission report had recommended disqualification of persons against whom charges have been framed a least year before the date of scrutiny of nominations for an offence punishable with a sentence of five years or more. The Supreme Court has time and again expressed itself in favour of decriminalising politicians, but at the same time pointed out its inability to push ahead with the idea due to lack of legislative mandate. (IPA Service)



Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Editors will be grateful if you can be reached via WhatsApp.



"Conformity is the jailer of freedom and the enemy of growth."

— John F. Kennedy

The Shillong Times

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Freedom and the judiciary

SET against apheavals elsewhere, India has a judiciary that faces no existential threat. Rather, it zealously seeks to safeguard its independence from the executive. Judiciary is subservient to the rulers in dictatoships but democracy accords prime importance to both people's will and power of the judiciary. Yet, the dividing line between the power of the executive and of the judiciary is often blurred. Strong rulers have a tendency to bend all arms of the establishment to their will. So with Israel now, where street protests are staged against attempts by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to introduce judicial reforms. A bill to accord more authority to the government in appointment of judges is expected before the Knesset soon. Protesters say this would affect the judiciary's independence. Such arguments are commonplace, but Netanyahu would not budge as is evident from his outright dismissal of the defence minister who tried to back the protesters.

Note the other extreme in Saudi Arabia. Crown Prince or chief executive Mohammed bin Salman is in a mind to put 10 judges on the death row; their crime being that they seemingly awarded 'soft' punishments to human rights campaigners and women activists. He is replacing these judges with hardliners who would review several such judgments of the past and make amends. Anything is possible in Saudi Arabia. Barbarism is integral to its governance systems even while it remains the most dependable ally of the US in the Middle East. George Bush junior's pro-democracy initiatives for the region yielded some results only in Iraq.

The judiciary in India is free for most part and this has been so all along. The system maintains considerable respectability even though in recent years it has exposed its underbelly and raised several questions. Absolute freedom can corrupt any system and so it goes for the judiciary too. Checks and balances are a must. Else, the nation would face grim consequences. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his nine years in power avoided rubbing powerful forces the wrong way though he carries with him an image of being a strong leader. Judicial reforms are the calling of the times in India too. Old systems rust. What was set in place seven decades ago should change with the times and its core should be strengthened rather than the government allowing a drift. To cite one instance, the judiciary is stonewalling the setting up of a national judicial appointments commission to oversee selection of judges and introduce bright young minds into the system and also to hold the judiciary accountable. The government obviously does not have the courage to stand its ground in such matters of urgent importance.

Public spaces also include roads, parking facilities, stands, etc. These places are also used for public gathering, demonstration and protests. Permissions are granted for such events. Religious gatherings are also allowed in government stadiums. Those who assemble in these places may well pray. There is no bar. Hat I suppose religious functions are strictly banned in the chief minister's official residence, the Secretariat, Assembly, etc. Then why the special privilege for the ministers and MLAs? It is patently unconstitutional. If the court is approached, in

# The Anathema question

By Albert Thyriang

Last week there was a column in this newspaper asking whether prayer in public spaces is anathema. The author states that there have been a number of articles in this paper criticizing the 'Christian MDA 2.0 leaders' for inviting church leaders to bless them on the swearing in ceremony. Since the author has neither mentioned any article nor named any writer his response too is here sans names.

Let us address the question head on. Prayer in government premises and government establishments should be forbidden. An exception may be made to government schools and other educational institutions. Prayers can be held during the Assembly but these prayers should be neutral using only terms like 'Creator', 'Almighty', 'Supreme Being' which are generally universally acceptable. Prayers should be completely non-denominational. This is not to say that prayers are bad but they are out of place in government premises. Government establishments belong to all. Everyone has a claim over these institutions. It is best they remain completely neutral and secular. Prayers can be held elsewhere. There is no objection to such places. The Secretariat and the Assembly are the mother of all other public institutions. They are the temples of democracy and secularism. These are institutions to promote and defend democracy and secularism. How can prayers, Christians or otherwise, be held in them? Once that is done democracy and secularism and the Constitution itself are desecrated! These are democratic institutions and not churches, temples, pagodas or mosques. They are the property of all the people of the state and not of any community. They certainly do not belong to the majority religion.

Public spaces also include roads, parking facilities, stands, etc. These places are also used for public gathering, demonstration and protests. Permissions are granted for such events. Religious gatherings are also allowed in government stadiums. Those who assemble in these places may well pray. There is no bar. Hat I suppose religious functions are strictly banned in the chief minister's official residence, the Secretariat, Assembly, etc. Then why the special privilege for the ministers and MLAs? It is patently unconstitutional. If the court is approached, in

all likelihood a ban will be imposed. Church leaders were never shown in bad light. However, they did lead prayers in the twin locations. Their presence is in the public domain. They might not have committed any crime but impropriety is the question. Pointing to the fact is not toxic. It is in fact the misuse of religion for political purposes which is currently a very toxic issue. In Nagaland, during the oath taking ceremony of the chief minister, a pastor prayed, ironically, for secularism to prevail, in Jesus' name. A choir was then sung on 'Alleluia Christ the King'. The 'Christian' swearing in function was in the presence of the prime minister himself. This is not an anti-Christian. In Meghalaya too instructions might have come from Delhi to organise prayer service to demonstrate that the saffron party is not against Christians. This is a trap. This has given legitimacy to the Sangh Pariva to propagate their Hindutva agenda. This ideology could be happily saying, "We permitted you to display your Christianity in Nagaland and Meghalaya, don't bother to see exhibit ours in the mainland India."

On March 20, there was a hard hitting article in a national weekly entitled, "Banning Christian prayers in public spaces", which attacked the BJP for hypocritically attempting to bring in Christians to its side and lambasted Christian leaders, Christians and politicians for warming up to the 'communal party' while anti-Christian activities continue unabated. It is quoted, "Sadly, several Christian politicians and leaders are so-called 'people too' trapped in playing the 'religion' card... Having a pastor pray and a choir sing a Christian song has only made it easier for the BJP to give legitimacy for Hindu rituals at Government functions and thus to effectively destroy the secular fabric of the country. Of course, several Christians, who hardly bother about Constitution's propriety and the severe repercussions such so-called 'Christian' acts would have on the future of the country, went 'gaga' when they watched clippings of the Nagaland swearing-in ceremony; there was a similar response when the Chief Minister of Meghalaya organised a prayer service for his minister and MLAs and

went to Valankani; those who cheered him did not care a hoot for the fact that the CM has literally sold his state to a fascist regime". Prime Minister Narendra Modi might have inaugurated the Karatsaya Path with Hindu bhajan and prayers. When the new Parliament Building is inaugurated Hindu pujaris may well offer prayers. But it does not mean we do the same. Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, atheists and the rest should also be able to firmly tell the Prime Minister that in a secular country this is not done. Christian political leaders in Nagaland and Meghalaya will no longer have the credibility to do so. Church leaders in Meghalaya and Nagaland will no longer have the authority. The Prime Minister is only a Hindu. The BJP is a Hindu ideology which wants to establish a majoritarian rule in the country. This majoritarianism precisely says that the majority community has the right to do as it pleases. The rest should be subservient to it. At the national level the will of this majority will prevail. Others may even be considered 'second class citizens'.

Those who rejoice at the events in Nagaland and Meghalaya will have no more say because here we also insist the since Christians are the majority others will have to just watch what we do in public institutions. We may belong to a region but we also have a national role to play. We cannot do as we please since we can do what we want in the North East we should be indifferent to the national narrative. We cannot be uncommitted. Secularism is violated nationally. We will resist only if we don't possess the majoritarian attitude in our own settings.

It is astonishing that ex-anglophobes politicians in BJP and other Hindu dominated states going to temples are cited. No one has the right to question them from being so. Here in Meghalaya too politicians can go to churches as often as they wish. There is absolutely no issue if politicians go to any places of worship seeking blessings. No one has ever objected that they can't do so. Objections are raised only when they welcome religious leaders to the most secular spaces in the state. Criticism is warranted only because there are also non-Christians in the state.

Secularism may be a foreign concept. Democracy is foreign. Christianity too is foreign. But these have become part and parcel of our lives. They are here to stay. It is repeated that Secularism is not a religion. It is not a particular religion. The prime minister, chief ministers and religious leaders have the responsibility to preserve this tenet of democracy.

## Bob's Banter The 2024, Hundred Metre Dash..!

By Robert Clements

It's always a good feeling when a talk goes well, and I felt my talk had gone quite well. The audience loved my jokes and even the man I thought was snoring when I spoke, was just breathing hard, at least that's what I was told later by his sister. "He's asthmatic, so he breathes hard like!" she had said, and that made me feel easier because having someone fall asleep when you give a speech can be caught on camera and then their newspaper reporters, the most unkindest of writers sometimes, will just capture that shot and tell the world I'm boring, which I vehemently protest and say, "I'm not!"

"You're not boring!" said the man at my elbow.

"Hey! You heard my thoughts?" I asked embarrassed.

"No, you said them loud!" said the man, "in fact you were very good! So I have a question for you, if it's okay?"

"Sure," I said, grateful to him for having put my words back to me.

"What do you think of Rahul being arrested?" he asked, innocently.

I was startled. I quickly left the man and his question and walked to the end of the hall then looked out. I looked to the right, then looked to the left, then to be very sure, looked up into the sky too.

"What are you searching for?" asked the man, a little impatiently.

"For a winged horse!" I said.

"Winged horse!" he guffawed, "And may I know the name of the winged horse you search for?"

"Pegasus!" I said slowly.

"Ah!" said the man, recognition suddenly dawning on his face. "You searched to make a statement because the winged horse is listening!"

"Maybe, maybe not!" I said carefully.

"No, the only Pegasus we have over here, are the peg asses, or the asses people make of themselves after a peg or two?"

We both laughed together at his wits pun, as a bonhomie and true established himself to us. He proceeded to ask me the question again, and this time I sat him down, and looked squarely into his face, and thought to leave aside my joking spirit and my search for the Great Horn, which I had had quite honestly and talk only about the matter at hand which was, I gently asked him to say again, the third time, "What do you think about Rahul's arrest?"

I nodded to myself, and realized I'd given the topic some thought and decided to take it head on. "I think democracy is a competitive race!" I said, and I saw that the man seemed interested and was not going to sneer like the asthmatic listener I had earlier so warming up to the subject continued, "To keep the race of democracy alive the competition has to be fair!"

The man nodded and looked interested, and actually looked at me with newfound curiosity. "You remember the movie Ben-Hur, and the spectacular chariot race between the hero and his wicked competitor?"

"Yes!" smiled my new friend. "I can still feel the tension, as the chariots raced each other in the arena!"

"What did Ben-Hur's competitor do? Instead of trying to prove he was a better horseman, a better racer than Ben-Hur, he started breaking the wheels of Ben-Hur's chariot, to make him

injured, so he would be unable to ride, and using other destructive ways to see Ben-Hur would lose."

"It wasn't a fair race," said the man now leaning forward.

I nodded and continued, "We in India as lovers of cricket, are furious about half tampering and even shaming. 'Unfair!' we shout, because anything that stands in the way of a fair competition is injustice!"

"In the same way for the greater good of democracy our elections need to be a competitive race, where the best man wins, and I was very happy that he was getting my kind of thought so easily."

"Now imagine," I said, "a competition, where at the beginning of a 100 metre dash, there's only one runner with no competition. Where are the others?" we the spectators, ask puzzled.

"Some of them got thrown out!" said my listener warming up to my storytelling.

"Some, threatened by government officials!" I whispered.

"Others are too scared that the same will be done to them!" said the man.

"Finally," I said, "we have a race with just one man running!" Can it be called a race? Just imagine the North Koreans with only one man, their leader in the race having the audacity to call themselves the 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea'!"

"That's so funny! What!" laughed my listener, "and disgraceful!"

"It's like a huge crowd of spectators, rushing to a racing track and cheering as a lone man hobbles down a 100 metre track to break the tape."

"What a race!" we tell ourselves as we congratulate the lone participant on his spectacular win!

And Kim Jong-un the lone runner, beams and tells the world, his world, his poor, poverty stricken, whipped into silence world how he beat the competition. Oh yes, he did, not during the race but before in prisons, torture chambers and with firing squads.

"And then feels them even more by telling his subjects their country is a democracy!" exclaimed the man listening to me shaking his head as he understood.

"We cry foul at 'fixed matches' but remain silent as the greatest race in our country turns into a no-competition final!"

"Are we being fooled?" asked the man, anger showing on his face. "Are we the people of India being fooled? Are all the competitors for our democratic elections being knocked out one by one, even before the election race begins?"

Iushed him to silence and was it our collective imaginations that we both heard the flapping of wings of a flying horse. "Hey," I said forcing a grin. "We're talking about the 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea, right?"

"Of course!" said the person who had asked me the question, "It's safe to talk about Korea here in India, but..."

"No buts!" I said, as we smiled sadly and watched Pegasus fly away then walked outside the hall to watch preparations being made for the 2024 Hundred Metre Dash, with only one participant qualified to run..!

The Author can be reached via an Online Writers Corner. For more details contact him on WhatsApp: 9892572883 bobshunter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

### Dog/Cattle litter at Umran, Ri Bhoi

Editor,

The other day someone on WhatsApp posted a picture of a leopard carrying a village dog it had just killed somewhere in the Umran Area of Ri Bhoi district. The exact village where this happened was not mentioned; simply the general area was described as Umran. Now this is interesting from many aspects but the first question that comes to mind is - where did this animal appear from. Most forested areas of Ri Bhoi, be they private or community land had since long been stripped clean of its trees of any mentionable size. Actually no forest remains except scrub patches here and there, where the largest animal to be found is the common barking deer. So the only forested area in Ri Bhoi where big game is still supposed to exist is in Nongshyllem Reserve forest. In 2021, Nongshyllem was declared as the Best Protected area in the NE, according to a management effectiveness evaluation (MEE) report of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. The situation now is unknown but one hopes it still retains the above standards.

Based on the above one can come to the conclusion that the leopard had probably strayed from Nongshyllem to Umran for the latter is not far from the former as the cross fields and definitely not far for a large canine like a leopard to cover. The exact village where this happened was not mentioned; simply the general area was described as Umran. Now this is interesting from many aspects but the first question that comes to mind is - where did this animal appear from. Most forested areas of Ri Bhoi, be they private or community land had since long been stripped clean of its trees of any mentionable size. Actually no forest remains except scrub patches here and there, where the largest animal to be found is the common barking deer. So the only forested area in Ri Bhoi where big game is still supposed to exist is in Nongshyllem Reserve forest. In 2021, Nongshyllem was declared as the Best Protected area in the NE, according to a management effectiveness evaluation (MEE) report of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. The situation now is unknown but one hopes it still retains the above standards.

Most worrying however is the daring of this leopard to enter a village and start killing dogs and cattle. Some incident might just happen where people get involved or become victims to the predator. Then we will have a major problem on our hands if the animal turns man eater. I have seen such things happening in the hills and terrai region of Utrabhandi. The cunning of man eaters must never be underestimated and a huge Government effort is usually called for to rid the area of such a scourge. Hopefully our Forest Department has become alert to the problem and that steps are being taken to apprehend this cattle-lifting leopard before it becomes something more dangerous.

Yours etc.,  
Toki Bihah,  
Via email

### Impact of air pollution on life expectancy

Editor,  
The time has come when there must be strict check on pollution otherwise the future generation will blame us for the complacency toward air pollution and will not forgive

us as the situation has come to a stage which is totally harmful to the health of all living beings. Just compare the data of states. Delhi saw the maximum plunge - 10 years - in life span in the country. The lowest life span fall, however, was recorded in Punjab, where the life span was shortened by four months. In Haryana, the average life span reduction was seven years and five months. In Punjab, it is five years and 11 months.

The average life span of an Indian has shortened by four years and 11 months owing to the air pollution, reveals the 2023 State of India's Environment report. In rural areas, people's lives are on average cut short by five years and two months, which is nine months more than the average life span lost by urban Indians.

Air pollution, in fact, has shortened the life span of 43.4 per cent of India's population by five years. The report was released by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) on Thursday revealing. The CSE is a public interest research and advocacy organisation that is based in New Delhi. Eight states and UTs saw the average life span shortened by five years or more while

nine states saw the average life span shortened by three to five years, according to the CSE Report. The life span in Haryana is shortened by 7 years and Punjab 6 years and for that pollution is to blame. Over and above that the average age of an Indian had fallen by 5 years.

Ujjwala yojna had proved very useful in the rural areas and in the same way that the Open Defecation Free (ODF) mission had been successfully implemented. The main source of pollution is from petrol driven vehicles and government is encouraging electrical vehicles and many incentives had been declared to encourage the electric or battery driven vehicles. Government had also established many solar plants to minimise pollution.

It is to be noted here that finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's latest budget emphasises on the government commitment to move towards net-zero carbon emission by 2070.

Yours etc.,  
Yash Pal Raibhan,  
Via email

aga Chauhan presented his address in the State Vidhan Sabha not in English but in Hindi. Now this address is critically under scrutiny not due to its contents but the language in which it was delivered although this address was also circulated in the English language. It is a long held tradition of State Vidhan Sabhas that no legislator speaks in Khasi or Garo languages. The majority of Meghalayas speak these two languages. I think if any legislator speaks in Hindi or English in the Vidhan Sabha there should be arrangements within the premises for its translation in Khasi and Garo languages. It is surprising that no one speaks in the State Assembly in the local languages of the State. A public debate by the stakeholders will be more fruitful as far as the language issue is concerned.

Yours etc.,  
Dr Kuldip Chand Agnihotri  
Himachal Pradesh

### Of legislative language

Editor,  
Meghalaya Governor Ph:

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"When your higher self is present, it always promotes peace."  
—Wayne Dyer

The Shillong Times  
Vol No LXXV No. 27 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 30, 2023

**Meghalaya Budget: Whither priorities**

THE Meghalaya Budget presented recently saw Education at No 8 in the priority list and Environment at No 12 in the list. This is indicative of the mind of the Government. It is a populist budget where Agriculture has been given priority with the run of the mill clichés such as increase in acreage for organic farming etc., which ultimately never happens. The Chief Minister's statements began with a laudatory note on how government expenditure more than doubled from Rs. 9,528 crore during 2017-18 to Rs. 20,729 crore in 2022-23. According to the Chief Minister, enhanced expenditure could improve governance and implementation capability. This should be stated by an independent agency and not by the Government.

The second point made is that the cumulative funding from externally aided projects increased from Rs. 2,303 crore to over Rs. 10,600 crore from 2018 to 2023. Meghalaya, we are told, is implementing several projects in collaboration with agencies like the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the New Development Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development. Here too the Government lauded itself and says that it is affirmation towards its commitment and execution capabilities from global institutions. The CM smugly announces that 90% of loans are repaid by the central Government which means the State can keep borrowing without any demonstrable projects on the ground.

The Chief Minister then pointed to programs like MGNREGS, PMGSY and Jal Jeevan Mission which he says are being implemented at an accelerated rate and have brought remarkable changes in the rural areas. The fact of the matter is that even in urban conglomerates people have to buy water and the quality of water supplied is questionable. There are claims much like Prime Minister Modi's although on a much lower scale to make Meghalaya a 10 billion-dollar economy. This will be achieved through government expenditure and private investments by prioritizing trade, tourism, high-value agriculture and building a knowledge economy. There are claims about striving to double farmers' income for the approximately 6 lakh rural households by focusing on horticulture, livestock, fisheries, and sericulture.

In Agriculture and Horticulture there is mention of pineapples and oranges and their increased production. But with inadequate processing facilities, pineapples with a short shelf life are becoming a burden for farmers. Strawberries which were introduced by some progressive officials are today not getting attention today and there is silence around this fruit although it fetches a decent income for farmers. Much is being trumpeted about the FOCUS scheme which intends to collectivise farmers and build farmers' cooperatives. In fact, considering that much money was spent on FOCUS especially before the elections it is now time to assess the success or failure of the Scheme. The other cliché in the Budget is about connecting every household with uninterrupted electricity and functional tap water and every village with motorable roads and internet connectivity. This is in the realm of aspirations. The budget statement ends with the words, "This is a people's government, and we will govern based on the values of collaboration, care and commitment. I dedicate this budget to the people, and I would like to term this budget the 'People's Budget.' The question is whether people were even consulted while preparing the budget and if their priorities were taken into consideration. Undoubtedly this is an aspirational budget. It will take the people of Meghalaya and the Opposition Parties to work together to ensure that there is minimum leakage of public revenue.

**Letters to the Editor**

**Separation of Church and State**

Editor,  
Yesterday's piece by Albert Thyming titled "The Anathema Question" (ST March 29, 2023) is perhaps one of the most important articles to have appeared in the local press in recent years. With great insights, the writer has skillfully analysed the dangers of mixing politics with religion. From the time of Partition, religion has been a flashpoint for violence, mayhem and mass murder in our country, but we have not yet learned to be better.  
As Thyming has pointed out there is nothing to celebrate or be reassured about, when politicians arrange for prayers or gospel singing at political events. The church and its pastors, by acquiescing in such arrangements are not only neglectful about propriety and solemnity, but

are also naive about political manipulation.  
That these displays of Christian rituals are conducted in the presence of BJP bigwigs, clearly indicates a political stage management that we are innocent to. It suits our local leaders in Meghalaya and Nagaland because they are catering to their vote bank, but it also plays into the hands of the national majoritarian party who will increase their influence in the Northeast Christian communities merely by simple plays like turning a blind eye to beef eating or Bible readings.  
The separation of church and state under the US Constitution is based on the history of early settlers who fled from religious persecution in their home countries in Europe. This Constitutional provision is based on the rights and respect for all faiths and to all citizens of whichever persuasion. Secularism should not be equated with anti-religion, but it is respect for all citizens

**It's Conrad Sangma's moment to redeem promises**

By Manas Chaudhuri

It is merely twenty one days since Conrad Sangma began his second year as Meghalaya's chief minister. Already there is one unmistakable portent that should distinguish him from his first essay—he appears to be more confident and is firmly in the driver's seat navigating the course of MDA 2.0. After an unprecedented feisty election that raised loads of dust and fury, Sangma has not made a single false move. Not so far. Forging alliance with BJP quite against the run of play, he was quick off the block in a ministerial formation. That he could rope in HSPDP and the two Independent MLAs promptly as the results were being declared, bears the hallmark of his astuteness. By these timely strokes he took the wind out of the rivals' sails. Surely, after blowing hot and cold UDDP had no choice but to follow suit in a timely joining the coalition.

Few can miss the other differences this time. The NPP has claimed a larger share of ministerial berths unlike last time when Conrad and his elder sibling James Sangma were the only two Goro ministers. He let the coalition partners have their choice of the cake to ensure stability. This time round, eight NPP ministers in a cabinet of 12 are calling the shots. The lone BJP minister and two from UDDP and solitary one from HSPDP will hardly be able to take the NPP in the cabinet. They will have to be content playing second fiddle. Moreover, Conrad made sure that the weighty portfolios are retained by NPP. Key portfolios like Home, Finance, PWD, PHE, Urban, Power, Health, Mining & Geology, Law, Supply etc., are with the NPP. And there lies an obvious message: NPP will not loosen its grip over MDA 2.0. For, it is a case of the winner take it all! To be candid, he has ticked in all the right boxes so far.

While it is too early in the day, the chief minister's real challenge will be how he lifts himself from a forgettable first term, dogged as it was by serious allegations of corruption and marred by devastating Covid pandemic. While he was seen as rather tentative and happy to placate one and all, so much so that the critics harboured the impression that he was soft on the law and order front bears repetition. The first five years of Conrad were turbulent, if also unconvincing in some ways. Many of the promised schemes came unstuck, even as unseemly allegations of corruption kept tumbling out. Yet, he managed to defy a huge handicap anti-incumbency and returned to power with added strength under his elbow. Now, it is time for him to raise the bar for himself and galvanise his cabinet and bureaucrats to deliver.

As a proactive leader of the pack, Conrad will have to give a big thrust to accelerate infrastructure development and help remove the haunting feeling of dependency among common citizens that Meghalaya has not been able to ensure ease of living. His first budget this year bears the stamp of his new found zest for making a difference.

**Promises unredeemed**  
Any which way we look today, the lofty promise of the architects of the state of making Meghalaya "A patch of beauty and a shining outpost of India" remains unredeemed. Former chief minister B.B Lyngdoh had envisioned to make Meghalaya, a "mini Japan" based on a policy of *laissez faire*. That was utopian and far distanced from reality. In the perspective of CICA and PHE's built over the decades is palpable. The civil hospitals in Shillong, Tura, Jowai etc., are able to provide service only up to a point. These health centres have been perennially suffering from lack of equipment, manpower or both. The gap is simply huge. It should not please anybody to note that Meghalaya is perhaps the only state in the country without a medical college. Even the sophisticated infrastructure created during Covid times is simply non-functional and perhaps a waste. And what about our poor road conditions? The PWD seems to defy all public outcry for better roads. If roads are meant to be the best advertisement about the state of the state, Meghalaya's image is taking a beating big time. The litany of public woes is certainly not exhaustive. Why after fifty years are we unable to deliver on each of these fronts is a critical question that few have cared to raise.

**No political instability**  
For now, Conrad Sangma is running a stable government. There is no perceived threat to his government, even though last week UDDP stalwart was reported to have said that post-Sohning bye election, the political equation could change. Assuming

that the seat is won by Late IDDR Lyngdoh's son riding on the wave of sympathy, UDDP's strength will crawl up to 12. That is too little to bring about a tectonic change in power sharing. Besides, the opposition is in complete disarray. Newbig VPI has already made it clear that it was not interested in joining any coalition. It has other pressing priorities, one of them being to unstage all rivals and storm into power for augmenting power. Conrad and TMC are behaving like an estranged couple, night-searing uncomfortably next to one another. There is no visible move for a rapprochement; so much so that they could not come to an understanding over the appointment of a Leader of the Opposition. So much for opposition unity. Therefore, the decks are clear for the chief minister to seize the opportunity with both hands and push for taking the people to the promised land.

The fact that Conrad Sangma has the ear of Delhi is a good augury. Despite making some strident assault on the MDA government during the electioneering, the assurance of hard-holding from the Prime Minister himself is reassuring. Conrad's excellent rapport with union ministers is an added plus. Flagship schemes and programmes from the centre should not be an issue. During the next five years, will it be too much to expect establishment of rail-link and introduction of commercial flights making it easier for the people to travel from the comfort of their own state? Similarly, emphasis on creation of human capital and availability of jobs in the private sector will have to be top on the priority list. Come to think of it, availability of resources has never been the real hindrance. It is the lack of judicious utilization of the opportunity is what has let the state down. The challenge therefore hinged on the man means can this be one man's job? It has to be team work from top to bottom. Ministers, bureaucrats, technocrats and the huge army of field staff all must rise to the task. It is entirely up to Conrad Sangma to lead from the front. The hard task is to pick the right person for the right job rather than go by the beaten track. If MDA 2.0 has to make the difference, launching of time-bound programmes, followed by periodic review, monitoring, accountability is the sine qua non. The ball is squarely in Conrad Sangma's court. Only a serious drive in performance during the next five years could be the harbinger of a new Meghalaya.

It is now Conrad Sangma's moment. He will have to take a call whether he wants to be another run of the mill chief minister or a pragmatic, go-getting achiever who will be remembered by history as a trend-setter.

Writer can be reached at: manas9chaudhuri@gmail.com



Conrad Sangma, Chief Minister of Meghalaya.

is fortunate that there are private hospitals that are doing the government's job. The inadequacy of the string of CICA and PHE's built over the decades is palpable. The civil hospitals in Shillong, Tura, Jowai etc., are able to provide service only up to a point. These health centres have been perennially suffering from lack of equipment, manpower or both. The gap is simply huge. It should not please anybody to note that Meghalaya is perhaps the only state in the country without a medical college. Even the sophisticated infrastructure created during Covid times is simply non-functional and perhaps a waste. And what about our poor road conditions? The PWD seems to defy all public outcry for better roads. If roads are meant to be the best advertisement about the state of the state, Meghalaya's image is taking a beating big time. The litany of public woes is certainly not exhaustive. Why after fifty years are we unable to deliver on each of these fronts is a critical question that few have cared to raise.

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100% to the correct answers. During the budget session 2023, a specific question was asked and the Home Department, bent around the bush, nervously starting to answer those questions beginning from A for Apple, B for Ball, C for cattle (why cattle, C for car) Nobody smuggles cars in Bangladesh, and by the time it reaches the 11th alphabet "K" the House is adjourned. People of the state are being lectured regarding the formations and duties of the Police Department just to kill time and ignore sensitive questions. To debate Article 371 in the next session is a gross Sese in Meghalaya, it would be impossible for a minister to read the whole Constitution. From A for Apple to Z for Zizag!

Yours etc,  
Jonathan W. Langria  
Via email

**A for apple: hedging the answers**

Editor  
When a teacher asks a student, "Give me one word beginning with I, K, J, G, Intelligent kids would answer I for India, K for Khushi, J for Jamaica, and G for Goro. Answers can be given in 5-10 seconds. A teacher will give

**Passing of 2023-24 Budget in Lok Sabha without debate, a subversion**

**For 1st time since independence, ruling party bypassed all norms**

By Anjan Roy

Overshadowed by the news of Rahul Gandhi's disqualification from parliament, March 24 witnessed another unique parliamentary episode.

For the first time in 75 years history of independent India, the general budget was passed without a debate on the provisions of the budget. It has bypassed all established customs and precedents associated with the passage of the union budget. Amidst the din and confusions of the last few days, with both treasury bench members and the opposition members raising their respective demands for apology and joint parliamentary probe, the budget provisions were never discussed by the members. The parliament discusses and examines various proposals made in the budget and only then it goes for passage.

In the rise of the shrill cries from both sides, all that happened was the budget was passed by a voice vote by the treasury benches. This is unprecedented. The union budget, comprising government expenditure running into Rs 45 lakh crore for the next five years, will be too much to expect establishment of rail-link and introduction of commercial flights making it easier for the people to travel from the comfort of their own state? Similarly, emphasis on creation of human capital and availability of jobs in the private sector will have to be top on the priority list. Come to think of it, availability of resources has never been the real hindrance. It is the lack of judicious utilization of the opportunity is what has let the state down. The challenge therefore hinged on the man means can this be one man's job? It has to be team work from top to bottom. Ministers, bureaucrats, technocrats and the huge army of field staff all must rise to the task. It is entirely up to Conrad Sangma to lead from the front. The hard task is to pick the right person for the right job rather than go by the beaten track. If MDA 2.0 has to make the difference, launching of time-bound programmes, followed by periodic review, monitoring, accountability is the sine qua non. The ball is squarely in Conrad Sangma's court. Only a serious drive in performance during the next five years could be the harbinger of a new Meghalaya.

And yet over the last seventy five years, very specific precedents and conventions

had revealed the detrimental effect of these proposals.

Another occasion, P Chidambaram, had changed many of his proposals under severe criticism from many quarters. Chidambaram was one of the most aggressive finance ministers to defend his budget proposals.

The discussions and proceedings would kind of confer an ownership of the budget by the finance minister and also to carry an imprimatur of the proposer of the budget—that is, finance minister.

Manmohan Singh would for ever remain etched in country's memory for the wide-ranging reforms he had introduced. Dr Singh had ended his budget saying he was freeing the "animal spirit" of Indian entrepreneurs.

But the crowning glory for the budget presentation was the wrap line he read out. Quoting French author Victor Hugo, Dr Singh had stated: "No power in the world could stop an idea whose time has come." And then he asserted that "now time has come for India to reform. India had struck out on a new path to development. It was so arduous that before the end of the year,

India had virtually overcome the basic issue it was started with—shortage of foreign exchange reserves which had the severe external default by India.

Today, India's treasure trove is over half a billion dollars, and provides adequate cushion for the country even in the face of global financial turmoil.

In every case of presentation of union budgets in course of discussions of the provisions and the proposals, the finance minister would take ownership of the budget. Every budget was that of the finance minister who presented it.

In the last few years, but mostly acutely in the current one passed on Friday, there is no ownership of the budget. Under the overwhelming shadow of the prime minister, the finance minister was rather demure to claim it was her budget and asked members to ensure its smooth passage. The budget was today passed by sheer main force—by the shouting brigades ongoing all parliamentary conventions and procedures.

Vesting the authority of clearing the purse of the government with the Lok Sabha—and not the upper house the Rajya Sabha—was important symbol of the expression of popular will.

Subjugating that will of the people in the din of the House was abandoning the voice of the people in determining how the consolidated fund of India was to be drawn and used for a whole year. It is sad diminution of the democratic rights of the people of India. (IPA Service)



A photograph showing a group of people, possibly in a public square or market, with some structures in the background.

had emerged for passage of the union budget over the entire budget session. The whole budget session used to be in two parts: one starting immediately after presentation of the budget by the finance minister; the second part of the budget session would start after a brief recess for parliament when other practices used to be followed away from the floor.

Following the presentation of the budget and a preliminary discussion of the budget, parliament would go on a recess. During the recess period, the joint parliamentary committees attached to each ministry would go through the proposals for expenditure of all major ministries.

Thereafter, the budget provisions and proposals used to be discussed through by the sitting parliament and in course of the debate budgets for individual ministries would be cleared by the discussion of the budget, the finance minister and other members would often clarify their views and proposals.

Following the intermediate procedures, the members of both treasury bench and opposition would make their observations on the budget. Often, very radical changes to the proposed budget would be suggested in the light of experience.

For example, in one budget presented by Yashwantrao Sinha, all major proposals regarding taxation and several other measures were rolled back in the face of criticisms from relevant sectors. Detailed analysis of the provisions in it's budget speech

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Yours etc,  
Glenn C. Kharkongor,  
Via email

Yours etc,  
Glenn C. Kharkongor,  
Via email

Yours etc,  
Glenn C. Kharkongor,  
Via email

Yours etc,  
D Palyatin,  
Via email

Yours etc,  
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"It is in your moments of decision that your destiny is shaped."

— Tony Robbins

The Shillong Times

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**Battleground Karnataka**

THE assembly elections in Karnataka will be a hotly contested one with both the ruling BJP and the Congress party running somewhat neck and neck – and the results will have major implications for national politics. With the EC announcing the poll schedule this week, the May 10 elections are more important for the BJP because this is the only state in the south where the party has enjoyed power. A loss this time would mean a total washout for it in an entire region consisting of five states and a Union Territory. For the Congress, Karnataka offers high hopes for the party to revive its lost fortunes at the national level and gain a much-needed moral strength for the 2024 LS polls.

Curiously, the opinion polls released shortly after the poll schedule declaration gave a 57 per cent popular support for the Congress party, signifying a strong anti-incumbency mood. The BJP had not got a majority in the last assembly polls too. It manipulated the assembly strength later and grabbed power from the Congress-JD-S alliance led by HD Kumaraswamy. This time, available indications are that the Congress and the JD-S have the capacity to upset the BJP apiece in decisive ways. In fact, many things went wrong for the BJP during its present tenure in Karnataka. BS Yeddyurappa was removed from the chief minister's post after massive allegations about his "corrupt" ways and a penchant to keep his two sons on both his sides to broker deals. This was more than what the BJP could chew even as Yeddyurappa was the poster boy for the powerful Lingayat community in state politics. Basavraj Bommai, who was the replacement for the CM's post, still has lesser clout than Yeddyurappa.

The going for the Congress, if it wins the elections, will not be easy either. Siddaramaiah seeks to get back to the CM's post on the proven strength of the SC votes – forming around 35 per cent – which is formidable. Another contender, DK Shivkumar, from the forward Vokkaliga community is equally powerful though he carries a tag of corruption. The Congress got a good response to Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra and the anti-incumbency factor is sure to add to its vote-fetching capacity this time. The JD-S with substantial support in certain sectors like Old Mysuru too could be depended on for a good anti-BJP push. Certain last-minute decisions to woo the SCs and BCs in the state by the Bommai government as also the "double-engine" development promise by the party and Prime Minister Narendra Modi might give some advantage to the BJP at the hustings.

It's good to see an adversarial and rambunctious Opposition in the Assembly today as they belong to three disparate parties – the VPP, Congress and TMC. During the elections these parties were at each other's throats. When Rahul Gandhi came to Shillong he drenched his ire at the TMC, temporarily setting aside the fact that his biggest foe nationally is the BJP. Rahul and his aide, Jaram Ramesh called Mukul Sangma a Judas merely because he left the all but asphyxiated Congress Party to join the TMC. Using terms like Judas to define an old party colleague, reeks of political conceit, especially when the Congress knows it has very slim chances of ever getting back to power in Meghalaya in the present circumstances. I doubt that Jaram Ramesh would have the audacity to tar with the same brush, a former Congress colleague Himanta Biswa Sarma because he would have got an equal measure of tongue lashing from the latter. Mukul Sangma happens to be a soft target. It's not without reason that people say, "in politics there are no permanent friends or enemies – only permanent interests." Shrewd politicians don't burn all their bridges; they never know when they would have to cross the bridge to build coalitions. In any case in politics, political rivals are not enemies. It's only in present day politics that the BJP considers all its political rivals as bitter foes and, in some cases even labels them anti-nationalists. That word is now a pan of the current political discourse. Hence the bitterness and acrimony.

In Meghalaya it appears that in the present legislature will not have a Leader of Opposition for the simple reason that the three ideologically incongruent parties are unable to do above their differences. There are thousands of Hindu children and adolescents in the villages and even in the peri-urban areas that have dropped out of school during the pandemic. I have spoken to a number of parents in the villages surveyed in East Khasi Hills and West Jaintia Hills. They plead their inability to send their kids to school because they have been left behind due to lack of mobile phones for online classes, amongst other handicaps. The present MDA-2 government does not have the data for school drop-outs in the years 2020-2022. Without data how will the government address this malaise which will later turn into an economic burden. Having a whole lot of children out of school also means that many more illiterate or semi-literate adults with no skills,

One lacuna of governance is in not having robust data on the human development

*"The Chief Minister speaks of thousands of crores allocated for different development projects. No independent agency has really monitored if the crores spent resulted in human development; if there was value for money and whether there were tangible and intangible outcomes from the funds borrowed from several external agencies."*

parameters. This is something I have stated in the past but which bears iteration. There are thousands of Hindu children and adolescents in the villages and even in the peri-urban areas that have dropped out of school during the pandemic. I have spoken to a number of parents in the villages surveyed in East Khasi Hills and West Jaintia Hills. They plead their inability to send their kids to school because they have been left behind due to lack of mobile phones for online classes, amongst other handicaps. The present MDA-2 government does not have the data for school drop-outs in the years 2020-2022. Without data how will the government address this malaise which will later turn into an economic burden. Having a whole lot of children out of school also means that many more illiterate or semi-literate adults with no skills,

**Competitive Opposition: Good or bad for Meghalaya**

By Patricia Mukhim

Assembly activities are ready to do battle. D Lyngdoh and his other colleague Ronnie Lyngdoh didn't lose their cool. They don't have to. Opposition MLAs can get their views across without the tough posturing, muscle-flexing and finger pointing inside the House.

One other issue that the Opposition in Meghalaya seems to miss out on is that it is incumbent upon them to critically analyse the current budget and if necessary find the funds to get experts to do it for them so that they know exactly where the revenue is leaking. The Chief Minister speaks of thousands of crores allocated for different development projects. No independent agency has really monitored if the crores spent resulted in human development; if there was value for money and whether there were tangible and intangible outcomes from the funds borrowed from several external agencies. Let the people at ground zero who have benefited from the schemes speak for themselves. We don't need to hear the Chief Minister labour in vain to add plaudits to his own government.

One lacuna of governance is in not having robust data on the human development

*"The Chief Minister speaks of thousands of crores allocated for different development projects. No independent agency has really monitored if the crores spent resulted in human development; if there was value for money and whether there were tangible and intangible outcomes from the funds borrowed from several external agencies."*

are too lazy to fight our own battles, that they exist to safeguard our interests. These are thousands of Hindu children and adolescents in the villages and even in the peri-urban areas that have dropped out of school during the pandemic. I have spoken to a number of parents in the villages surveyed in East Khasi Hills and West Jaintia Hills. They plead their inability to send their kids to school because they have been left behind due to lack of mobile phones for online classes, amongst other handicaps. The present MDA-2 government does not have the data for school drop-outs in the years 2020-2022. Without data how will the government address this malaise which will later turn into an economic burden. Having a whole lot of children out of school also means that many more illiterate or semi-literate adults with no skills,

**Karnataka assembly polls big test for both Congress and BJP**

**Rahul Gandhi as main campaigner has to prove his mettle against PM**

By Sushil Kuttu

The single-phase Karnataka assembly elections takes place on May 10. It is a largely 3-party race, with the BJP, the Congress and HD Kumaraswamy's Janata Dal (S) fighting it out in the full glare of domestic, national and international media. The Karnataka elections are the first big elections being fought after the recent political upheavals featuring Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his business tycoon friend Gautam Adani and Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi, who had led his Bharat Jodo Yatra through Karnataka with irrepressible gusto. Needless to say, the Karnataka assembly election is a matter of "life and death" for the Congress after the disqualification of Rahul Gandhi from the Lok Sabha.

depends on the Congress winning the Karnataka election. Only a victory will validate the "success" claim of Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra. Otherwise, time spent in the BJP will be another hole in Rahul Gandhi's political "CV", a gap of four-plus months gone to waste from Rahul's calendar. Rahul Gandhi's BJP image is intrinsically linked to 2024. The Congress and, particularly, Rahul Gandhi cannot overlook and underestimate the importance of the Karnataka election. More so, because Rahul Gandhi will be the party's star campaigner, starting from Karnataka. Rahul Gandhi will kick-start his Karnataka campaign from Kolar, the same place from where he had posed for the question:



The Gandhi scion has positioned himself as the primary challenger to Prime Minister Narendra Modi...

"Are all with the surname Modi" these days. The real question is, does the Congress have the stamina to stay put and fight, and keep winning? One big loss will seal its fate, and lead the Opposition. None of the ambitious regional satraps will acknowledge Congress leadership if the Congress starts with a loss in Karnataka for which Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge will have to take the blame. Congress workers will not forget Kharge exhorting them at the Rajpur library to "work with discipline, solidarity and complete unity." It was Kharge who set the party's tone for the "all-India" 2024 Lok Sabha elections, which the party said were "crucial for India's future."

But Rahul Gandhi also would not be able to walk away from a loss in Karnataka. With Rahul Gandhi leading the Karnataka election campaign, there is no way he can escape responsibility, in a manner to wait and watch. There are also a number of state bigwigs of both parties whose reputations will be on the line; among them none taller than Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, for whom Karnataka is home-state, and happily hunting ground. More importantly, this will be Kharge's first big election since he took charge of the party apparatus. Already, Kharge is seen as an insignificant sidekick to Rahul Gandhi's big nuclear options. But with this election, Kharge has the chance to prove he is his own man, and nobody's fool. The Dalit Congress President "Dalit Hood" will be tested. Will more Dalit voters flock and flock to the Congress?

That said, only a win in Karnataka can rejuvenate the Congress and regenerate it for the remaining five 2023 assembly polls. The Congress sees itself the natural leader of the Opposition, the only opposition party with the reach and national vote-share to beat the BJP. The Congress believes it will win in 2024. But for that, the Congress must win Karnataka, the first of the "big states" going to polls in 2023.

The Congress cannot afford to lose, either. Rahul Gandhi's present and future

**Letters to the Editor**

**Kudos Bah Ardent!**

Editor, On March 20 last, the Voice of People Party (VPP) staged a walk out from the Assembly hall protesting against the State Governor not for giving his inaugural speech in Hindi. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma attempted to defend the Governor's action but the VPP were adamant in their unwavering stance by asserting, thus, "Hindi speaking Governor has been sent to the state, we do not understand what they are talking, so we will stage a walk out." Ardent told the august House. It's perhaps an unequivocal and indisguised experiment to willy-nilly fast a one language, one nation policy of the siffon government of Modi in Meghalaya!

The reaction of VPP has evidently become a test of sorts amongst significant indigenous populace, and no wonder the same has reportedly unleashed nation-wide attention and compliments are pouring in. Hitherto, none of our legislator has demonstrated such an uncompromising backbone. Incidentally, the

President, Khasi Authors' Society (KAS) Nangliar has heaped adulation on Ardent in glowing terms. And notably it goes without saying that there are some members in the Legislative Assembly who are ardent votaries of Khasi literature who ought to have joined forces with the VPP but being fortuitously placed on the meagry wing they have had to keep dumb silence. Some have arguably defended the latter as it's par for the course for prominent members of the treasury to refrain from such an exercise else it could have been termed as mavericks. Just like our ruling party inside the hallowed house of Parliament who are disrupting important proceedings here, hoping for blood of Rahul Gandhi for his comments on the functioning of the spirit of Democracy in India! This is perhaps in no uncertain terms the first such unprecedented instance in independent India for a ruling party to stoop to such vile tactics in order to divert public attention elsewhere when in inextorable bad realities.

Markedly, MP Dinko O'Brien couldn't have been more right when he fittingly remarked, "I had never happened in the past when the ruling party MPs were shouting slogans to stall the proceedings of the Lower House of the Parliament". Yours etc., Jerome K. Dikchogh, Shillong-2

**Kleptocracy in Meghalaya**  
Editor, Soon after the Iraq invasion, Paul Bremer became the most powerful administrator gaining rockstar status but for Meghalaya you need not start a war to attain a V, Y and Z security status. Political birds on black tinted SUVs drive past traffic to reach their office cubicles to prove their punctuality. To add insult to injury, a debated charter this week on the misuse of VIP vehicles by relatives of VIPs and heave knows where they are heading to. Illegal businesses are flourishing and the very noses of law enforcement agencies. By 2028, the number of entrepreneurs in this state who would join the handwagon would put even the likes of Hermand Amador, the French business tycoon the founder, chairman, and chief executive HSF Vait-

the world's largest luxury goods company, Javier Blas, author of 'The World for Sale' gives a helicopter view of how kleptocrats have demolished the ramparts of a democracy. The 10 billion dollar economy in Meghalaya will become an opportunity for those to power to enhance their wealth instead of providing justice to the rural masses who not only trust but vote for their beloved leaders hoping for basic requirements of quality education, robust healthcare, potable water, functioning electricity besides others. Yours etc., Christopher Galpho, Shillong-10

**Implement strict traffic rules!**  
Editor, In the recently concluded Assembly session, there was a lot of discussion and deliberation on the traffic movements especially from Umshyapri towards Upper Shillong. I am glad to note that the respected Representative from Mylliem Constituency who brought this never-ending issue of traffic congestion for discussion. However I am not with mixed emotions, happy that this issue was discussed but also sad if this problem will ever see solutions after listening to the discussion in the Assembly. Traffic congestion specifically in that area is not only from Umshyapri to Upper Shillong but also Riblong junction, Angiate Patrol pump and Rhino junctions. The proposed four lanes will not only ease congestion in Upper Shillong side but will bring a bottleneck in Riblong junction and the junction and thereby create even more traffic chaos. There is only one solution and that is to construct an overbridge in Riblong junction and the junction is one of the finest places where an overbridge can be constructed and it is also the most essential junction which connects highways. While in other parts of Shillong city, the plan to bring school buses maybe difficult especially in some areas where schools are situated inside residential localities like in Jaiv, Riatsambiah, Mawkar but people to ferry school children may be the other option. Heavy vehicles especially when loaded, JCB's, trucks belonging to the BSF/Assam

Rifles seeing empty streets in the city during the day are obstructing the flow of traffic since the road is narrow and may not be allowed during the day. Lastly, the need of the hour is for all to maintain traffic discipline and strictly follow traffic rules. Here in Shillong people do not follow traffic rules strictly. Drivers do not respect or follow the divider or the white line on the road; there's rampant overtaking even when traffic is slow; taking U-turns, stopping and parking whenever and wherever one wants. Lanes should be properly followed as seen in Riblong where many cars take abruptly overtake before reaching Riblong junction to go straight to Upper Shillong. There are many small actions which if followed and traffic rules are strictly implemented, will bring a lot of change in the traffic scenario at present. Yours etc., N Lyngdoh, Via email

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