

"Change your opinions, keep to your principles; change your leaves, keep intact your roots."

— Victor Hugo

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Good Sense Prevails

THE Deputy Commissioner (DC), East Khasi Hills has rescinded the order calling for Section 144 CrPC on June 4, the day when election results would be announced. The DC first said that he apprehends law and order problems on that day. Where he collected the intelligence input for this is not known but some political observers believe that this is a political decision which was sought to be enforced by the district administration. Anger has been brewing over this call for clamping down on free movement and gathering on vote counting day. Questions have been asked as to what is different this time from other times in the past when crowds waited for the news of the success of their candidates and rejoiced by singing and taking our processions across the city. At no time in these 22 years has any restriction been imposed on people gathering in groups to await the election results with bated breath.

Intuitive administrative sense means that those in positions of authority must keep their eyes and ears open to listen to the voices of people from the ground. Besides, the Constitution grants us rights which include the right to free movement and peaceful assembly. Section 144 is imposed when a district magistrate, a sub-divisional magistrate and any other administrative officer apprehend danger and nuisance. Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), 1973, is a colonial-era statute that has been preserved in the Code. In circumstances of imminent nuisance or suspected danger of an incident that could create problems or harm human life or property, Section 144 is applied. Public gatherings are generally forbidden by Section 144 of the CrPC. In the past, Section 144 has been used to impose limitations in an effort to suppress rallies that could spark riots or other forms of violence. When there is an emergency, the Executive Magistrate has been given the authority to enforce Section 144. Internet shutdowns and restrictions on telecom services have frequently been enacted under Section 144.

But it is evident that as of today there are no palpable signs of any possibility of the breakdown of law and order in Shillong. On the contrary it would paint the government in a bad light if it imposed Section 144 and people violated that imposition. Elections have come and gone and never was there any occasion when the government of the day would clamp down on public movement. There is a sense of claustrophobia that pervades the atmosphere when there are regulations on public movement and gatherings especially on a day when passions run high and the supporters of the winning candidates wish to rejoice in the victory of their candidate. It would also be a damp squib not to be able to take out election rallies on the day of counting of votes when this has been the practice for the past 52 years.

Backstage Actors in the Elections

By H. Srikanth

The long and tedious electioneering process has finally ended. What initially appeared to be a one-sided game has turned out to be a one-to-battle where the two rival party alliances are evenly placed. The BJP's slogan "Chaar Sau Paar" has few takers today, but many opinion polls aired on corporate media channels predict the NDA's victory. However, many social media channels and leading satta bazars in the country foresee tough competition between NDA and INDI Alliances. In the LS elections just concluded, the star campaigner and the NDA's face visible everywhere remained that of our Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. At 74, he campaigned in almost all parts of India, taking on his shoulders the responsibility of ensuring the victory of his party. Other BJP leaders, barring Amit Shah and J.P. Nadda, confined themselves mostly to particular states. In contrast, the leaders of INDI Alliance-Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Tejaswini Yadav, Akhilesh Yadav and Arvind Kejriwal - stole the show with their energetic presence. Voters saw them addressing joint public meetings and rallies in different states. While Modi tried to divert the attention of people raising emotive issues intending to divide the voters on communal lines, the opposition leaders kept on harping on the issues of unemployment, price-rise and growing authoritarianism, and effectively created a counter narrative of the need for communal amity and brotherhood. In the absence of any wave in favour of any political party or leader, local issues appear to be the determining factors in the election outcome.

While political leaders of different parties took centre stage and received much of the public and media attention, we should not forget the role of several known and little known individuals from a variety of fields playing important roles as backstage actors and determining the course of the election campaign. These actors include social activists, intellectuals, lawyers, journalists, and artists. Not that they all had the same ideas or views. Look at some intellectuals. Claiming that economic indicators in India in 2024 were better than what it was in 2019, the economist, Surjit Bhalla, batted for the Modi government and predicted that BJP would get around 330 seats. In different interviews that he gave to news channels, Prashant Kishor, the political analyst, while stating that it is impos-

sible to get over 400 seats, also asserted that as there is no anti-Modi wave, it is not impossible for BJP to retain its present tally of 303 and even a few more seats. Some, like Pradeep Gupta, argued that Modi's ration scheme is so popular that the women who are benefiting from the scheme will ensure the victory of Modi. Contradicting these narratives which view the imminence of Modi's third term, intellectuals like Parakala Prabhakar and Yogendra Yadav argued that in the absence of any wave favouring Modi, it is impossible for the BJP to retain its dominance in the northern states and make any inroads into the eastern and southern states, and hence the BJP will get less than the majority mark this time, opening the possibility for the INDI Alliance. Social media channels, which have propagated the views of the likes of Parakala

the opposition and project Modi as the only reliable choice for the Indian voters. Barring exceptions like Rajdeep Sardesai, we don't find many dissenting voices in the corporate media. In this situation, YouTube emerged as a social media channel providing an alternative source of data and information. Earlier, the BJP exercised control over social media channels through its IT cell. But during the electioneering, social media channels supporting the INDI Alliance multiplied and became very active. Dissenting journalists like Ravish Kumar, Ajit Anjum, Abhisar Sharma, Arfa Khanum Sherwani, etc., played a decisive role in exposing the ruling regime and came out in support of the opposition leaders. Karan Thapar's spat with Prashant Kishor on the election prediction attracted national attention. Online channels like The Wire and

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and Yadav, have boosted the confidence of the opposition parties and the voters supporting them. Lawyer activists like Prashant Bhushan, Kapil Sibal, etc., also played a very important role in influencing the Supreme Court on the electoral bond scheme thereby giving a weapon to the opposition to hit on the ruling regime. These lawyers also indicted the inaction of the Election Commission and created public awareness on how to prevent administrative rigging. They played a key role in securing an interim bail for Arvind Kejriwal.

Media persons are another section that remained active during this period, coming out in support of Modi or against him. The journalists-cum-TV anchors like Arnab Goswami, Chitra Tripathy, Rubika Liaquat, Shiv Aroor, Sudhir Chaudhary, Rajat Sharma, etc., who are associated with leading corporate media channels have taken pro-Modi stances and during this election period they did everything possible to vilify

Newslandry became the platforms for critical journalists around the country to put forward alternative viewpoints. YouTubers like Dhruv Rathee and Akash Banerjee, who make videos on different social themes, openly took a stand against the ruling BJP and used their platforms to debunk the claims of the government and expose the authoritarian tendencies of the Modi regime.

The news channels owned by some of these journalists have thousands and lakhs of faithful subscribers. Such alternative news-ports and channels became popular in many other regional languages as well. They took on the might of the organized corporate 24/7 news channels.

The other group that needs special mention are artists. On the eve of elections, all political parties spend a lot of money to engage professional singers, dancers and theatre artists to come out with video songs and performances in praise of their leaders. Party IT

cells are used to propagate their politics through songs and political memes: But the elections witnessed the spontaneous participation of artists who educated and entertained the masses through their creative interventions in the form of songs, spoofs, memes, mimicry and other art forms. Dhruv Rathee used AI tools to come out with political songs in different languages. Neha Singh Rathore's Bhojpuri songs became instant hits in the Hindi belt. Paranjoy Guha Thakurtha came out with the song, 'Saheb', in different languages critiquing Modi's politics. Garima, a woman mimicry artist, who effortlessly imitates Kangana Ranaut, Nirmala Seetha Raman and Smriti Irani, won the hearts of many with her subtle humour and creative content. Shyam Rangeela, another famous mimicry artist who shot to fame with his imitation of Modi and Rahul Gandhi, hit the news by trying to contest against Narendra Modi in the Varanasi parliamentary seat. One can identify such artists in different states. These artists took advantage of AI and the Internet to share their political views and influence public opinion.

One good thing that the elections did is to remove the fear factor. Although people were discontented with government policies, they were so scared of expressing the same in the public out of fear of punitive action by the state agencies. But the elections created a conducive political environment to discuss and debate on different public forums and platforms. Many came out openly to express their support for leaders and parties that they like. Public streets, universities, TV studios, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp became the platforms for expression of political views and preferences. Democracy can take deep roots and is able to survive only when people have access to facts and can make informed and rational judgments. Who finally wins the elections and forms the government at the center is a different question. Visionary leaders and responsible political parties are no doubt needed. But we cannot afford to rely on them all the time. The masses have a role to play. Indian democracy survived all kinds of turbulence and challenges and as long as the country reproduces citizens who refuse to bend their knees before the powerful; hold their heads high, learn to think logically, and dare to speak truth, our democracy survives.

Khasi by faith

By Hammarsing L Kharhmar

The editorial piece titled, "Religion and Khasi Tribal Identity" by Fabian Lyngdoh published in this paper on May 30, 2024, was an interesting article with several points that made one ponder and reflect. However, what really caught my attention more than anything else and surprised me was the sentence: "Christian church denominations have largely replaced the roles of clans as religious institutions for guiding the moral and spiritual life of the people in villages and urban localities." It made me immediately wonder and ask myself: Is it possible for a Global Faith to replace an Indigenous Socio-Religious Institution?

I believe this statement by the author implies or rather confirms that: (1) "Christian Church Denominations" have claimed ownership of the role and powers of the Clan as a Socio-Religious Institution in an attempt to subsume Khasi Culture. (2) These Denominations believe that the Clans have largely lost all connection to the Khasi morals, ethics

influenced Niam Khasi, insinuating that it is therefore no longer authentic. This way of thinking is the by-product of a colonised mind that believes anything or everything sublime comes from outside, and refuses to see and acknowledge the deep wisdom and spiritual treasures, handed down by the ancestors of the Khasi. Similarities exist between all indigenous faiths of the subcontinent with each having its own unique ways. Let us not forget the origin of the faith and where it will always belong. "Ka Bri U Hynhiewtrep" is the sacred land to the followers of Niam Khasi. The sacred link between the past, the present and the future remains intact to those who profess this. The movement with the changing times has always happened and we will continue to adapt without breaking or leaving the sacred foundation handed down to us by ancestors since time immemorial.

The assertion that there are only clan religions (Niam Kur) is as irresponsible and misleading as saying there



and Khasi Spirituality, so they must now take over the roles of the Khasi (Maternal Uncles) or are they planning on imparting new morals and ethics? I wonder if they are adapting to the 'Khasi Way' or are they about to fully transform society into something else?

I always thought it was taboo for the Church to mix the new religion with the indigenous cultural practices, which it historically considered 'paganistic'. Is this the beginning of the open absorption of indigenous rituals such as the very sacred "Tangjai" into their fold? The incorporation and assimilation without consent of indigenous religious symbols and objects, prayers, sacred stories and festivals has been happening in plain sight over the years. Each time a voice is raised the reply given is that there is no relation between religion and culture and that the usage of indigenous religious symbols, practices etc., is done without any religious connotations. This is a complete lie and a deep insult to all the followers of the Indigenous Faith. The statement that the Indigenous Faith as practiced in modern times is a new religion unveils a lack of understanding and first-hand knowledge of the fundamentals of Khasi religious practice. He writes that prior to the advent of the British and Christianity the Khasis had already deviated from the "religious traditions of their ancestors" citing a few examples of how Hindu deities had been incorporated into the community religion. This should come as no surprise as the Khasis are one of the oldest tribes in the subcontinent and there have been several centuries of exchange and movement of ideas and people, to and fro. However, I have yet to hear of stories of widespread uprooting or rejection of the soul of the land. These deities often find their place in a few festivals or rituals and have not supplanted the core beliefs.

Fabian Lyngdoh also claims that Hindu spirituality and philosophy has

are only clans and not a single race or tribe: 'Jaidbynriew'. The author has clearly shown he cannot imagine the existence of the Indigenous Faith beyond the Niam Kur, which he considers an extinct religious institution, whose functions now should be performed by a Global Faith. Which is why he erroneously states that Niam Khasi is a "New Indigenous Faith. The reality in fact, is that Niam Kur, Niam Jing, Niam Shnong, Niam Raid, Niam Hima are still alive. They are practiced where it is still respected and also feasible. But, thankfully, wherever it has been lost or weakened there are the Seng Khasi and Sein Raj and their sister organisations, who are there to help the indigenous stay grounded and rooted. The organisations persevere and endeavour without any expectation of reward - material or spiritual - to uplift and keep alive the "Spiritual Truth of U Hynhiewtrep". The ancient and the modern exist side by side in Indigenous Faith homes. The rituals and forms of obeisance may differ from home to home, clan to clan, even within the same clan, village to village and region to region but the foundation remains the same.

Each and every indigenous prayer, ritual or ceremony always ends with Infinite Obeisance to the One Truth: U Blei Trai Kynrad Nongbuh Nongthaw (God, The Almighty Creator). The faith is dynamic and that is why it has survived since time immemorial. To call it new is incorrect and blatantly subversive. As more true pride and understanding for one's own spiritual roots continue to grow, those who profess the Indigenous Faith will continue to move forward into "Modernity with Roots" energised by the wisdom of the motto "Tied Lalade bad Burom ia Kiwet" (Love yourself and Respect that of others) and they will forever remain rooted on the three divine principles of Niam Khasi - Niamtre: Kamai ia ka Hok, Tip Kur Tip Kha, Tip Briew Tip Blei "IM KA NIAM IM KA JAIDBYNRIEW"

Letters to the Editor

Shifting affiliation from Central to State University

Editor,
The news that the Government of Meghalaya is planning to shift the affiliation of all colleges in Meghalaya from a Central University which has been running for the past 50 years to a State University which is yet to see the light of day became a topic of discussion and a real surprise to me. We all know that the North-Eastern Hill University is well oiled and has the manpower to run the different Schools and the Departments within the Schools. The question is whether the State University has all the Schools and the Departments manned by qualified educationists. Is it so easy to transfer all the courses run in different colleges to a State University? Getting recognition from the UGC is not sufficient, there is a need to have a proper administrative set up to cater to the needs of the students. If proper thought and time is given the opening of a State University will

provide employment to the educated qualified youth but that itself is a lengthy process. In Meghalaya not all colleges are fully funded by the Government and hence a proper consultation and discussion is required with all the stakeholders. Just because the Government wants to solve the problems facing the students with CUET it cannot take a hasty decision of making a State University functional; rather it should have proper consultations to upgrade different technological facilities in all districts, especially internet connectivity which is so important for us today. Keep in mind that haste makes waste hence, for the secure future of the youth of the State proper thought must be given and avoid at all cost the idea of looking for service providers, otherwise, the future of our youth is doomed.

Yours etc.,
Dr Sylvanus Lamare
Shillong

Who wants to abolish the ST status?

Editor
Apropos of the article by Fabian Lyngdoh captioned, "Religion and Khasi Tribal Identity", (ST May

30, 2024), in where he wrote about the identity (tribal identity) which is embraced by the Khasi people who practise different religions which is well and good. But I am surprised to know from him about the "Scheduled Tribe" status and that there are forces that want to delete that status from the Khasi people who had embraced the Christianity and Islam. I had not come across that plan or motive in newspapers and other media. Hence I would like to know who are those who want to abolish take away that Scheduled Tribe status from the Khasi Christians and Khasi Muslims. On the contrary what I have been hearing over the media and reading in newspapers is that in some families children take the clan name of their father instead of their mother.

Yours etc.,
Wallambiang Rani
Upper Shillong

Maliki in Darkness

Editor,
Residents of Malki, Shillong-1 are grappling with prolonged and frequent power outages, making it one of the few localities in Shillong suffering from

such disruptions. In stark contrast, neighbouring areas like Laitumkhrak, Police Bazar, Nongthymmai and even far off villages that can be seen from Malki such as Shilliang Um in the west of Shillong, Mawpat in the East enjoy uninterrupted power supply, leaving Malki residents frustrated and seeking answers.

The power cuts in Malki Shillong-1 have become a daily ordeal, affecting households, businesses, and students preparing for exams. Despite numerous complaints to the Meghalaya Power Distribution Corporation Limited (MePDCL) and local representatives, the situation remains unchanged. Many residents report losing electricity for several hours each day, causing significant inconvenience and disruption. "Every evening, we sit in darkness while our neighbours just a few streets away have all their lights on," said a frustrated resident. "We have raised this issue multiple times, but it seems to fall on deaf ears."

The disparity in power supply has led to speculation among residents that their locality is being neglected. Some suggest that Malki Shillong-1 is being deliberately overlooked due to political reasons, as none of the elected representatives

have shown any interest in addressing the problem. Adding insult to injury, the local authorities and representatives appear to be preoccupied with election preparations, seemingly ignoring the basic needs of their constituents. "It seems our representatives are more interested in securing their seats for the next term rather than ensuring we have power in our homes. Perhaps they think their campaign promises will be more effective if we can't see the darkness they've left us in," quipped another resident.

Local businesses are also feeling the pinch, with many relying on costly generators to keep operations running. "The power cuts are killing our business. We are losing customers and money every day," said a proprietor who runs a small internet café in the area, adding that the noise and fumes from generators are unbearable, and it's costing them a fortune to keep them fuelled.

Educational institutions in the area are also struggling. Teachers report that power cuts disrupt classes and make it difficult to use electronic teaching aids. Students, particularly those preparing for board exams, are finding it hard to study without consistent electricity. They question how they

can compete with students from other areas when they can't even study properly?

While MePDCL has attributed the outages to maintenance issues and load shedding, residents argue that these excuses do not explain why neighbouring localities are unaffected. They demand a thorough investigation and immediate action to resolve the issue. Despite the growing frustration and mounting pressure, the response from local representatives has been lacklustre. Their public statements have largely been limited to vague assurances of looking into the matter, with no concrete actions taken. This inaction has only fuelled the residents' determination to fight for their rights. As the lights continue to flicker in Malki Shillong-1, the residents hope that their collective voice will compel the authorities to act. Until then, they remain in the dark, both literally and figuratively, while their representatives campaign for their future at the expense of their present.

Yours etc.,
Maven Nongrum
Shillong-1

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Why did primates evolve such big brains?



By Ben Hirsch

Thanks to our large brains, humans and non-human primates are smarter than most mammals. But why do some species develop large brains in the first place? The leading hypothesis for how primates evolved large brains involves a feedback loop: smarter animals use their intelligence to find food more efficiently, resulting in more calories, which provides the energy to power a large brain. Support for this idea comes from studies that have found a correlation between brain size and diet - more specifically, the amount of fruit in an animal's diet.

Fruit is a high-power food, but creates a complicated puzzle for animals. Different fruit species ripen at different times of the year and are spread throughout an animal's home range. Animals that need to find such highly variable food might be more likely to evolve large brains.

A key assumption here is that species with larger brains are more intelligent and therefore can find food more efficiently. In a new study published in *Proceed-*

ings of the Royal Society B, we directly tested this hypothesis of brain evolution for the first time.

Tracking fruit eaters in Panama

A major problem for testing the fruit-diet hypothesis is that measuring foraging efficiency is difficult. The mammals we study travel long distances, usually more than three kilometres per day, making it difficult to replicate realistic study conditions in a lab.

Some researchers have experimentally manipulated food distribution in wild animals, but the animals needed extensive training to learn to visit human-made food resources.

Do smarter foragers forage smarter?

In our study, we took advantage of a natural phenomenon in Panama that occurs when the normally complex fruit puzzle shrinks to just a few species of ripe fruit over a three-month period. During this time, all fruit-eating mammals are forced to focus on one tree species: *Dipteryx oleifera*.

Fortunately for us, *Dipteryx* trees are huge, some-

times reaching 40-50 metres high, and produce bright purple flowers in summer. We mapped the island with drones during the flowering season and identified patches of purple flowers, mapping virtually every *Dipteryx* that produced fruit a few months later.

This gave us the full extent of the fruit puzzle our study animals faced, but we still needed to test how efficiently animals with different brain sizes visited these trees. We chose two large-brained primates (spider monkeys and white-faced capuchins) and two smaller-brained raccoon relatives (white-nosed coatis and kinkajous).

Over two fruiting seasons, we collected movement data from more than 40 individual animals, resulting in more than 600,000 GPS locations.

We then had to figure out when animals entered and exited the fruit trees, we had to extrapolate their location between the GPS fixes taken every four minutes. Some animals also had the bad habit of sleeping in *Dipteryx* trees. Thankfully, our collars recorded animal activity, so we could tell when they were sleeping.

Once these challenges were solved, we calculated route efficiency as the daily amount of time spent active in *Dipteryx* trees, divided by the distance travelled.

If larger-brained animals use their intelligence to more efficiently visit fruit trees, we would expect the big-brained primates in our study to have more efficient foraging routes.

That's not what we found.

The two monkey species didn't have more efficient routes than the two non-primates, which puts a serious dent in the fruit-diet hypothesis of brain evolution. If smarter species were more efficient, they might be able to satisfy their nutritional needs more quickly, then spend the rest of the day relaxing.

If this was the case, we would have expected the monkeys to route themselves more efficiently in the first few hours of the day after waking up hungry. When looking at these first 2-4 hours of the day, we found the same result: monkeys were not more efficient than non-primates.

Why the big brains, then?

So, if the evolution of these large brains doesn't allow primates to plan more efficient foraging routes, why did brain size increase in some species? Perhaps it has to do with memory. If species with larger brains have better episodic memory, they might be able to optimise the timing of fruit tree visits to get more food. Preliminary analyses of our dataset didn't support this explanation, but we'll need more detailed studies to test this hypothesis.

Intelligence might be linked to tool use, which could help an animal extract more nutrients from their environment. Of our four study species, the white-faced capuchin monkey is the only one that's been observed using tools, and it also has the largest brain (relative to body size).

Our study could also lend support to the hypothesis that brain size increased to handle the complexities of living in a social group.

Large brains have evolved in an assortment of vertebrates (dolphins, parrots, crows) and invertebrates (octopuses). While our study can't determine the exact drivers of brain evolution in all of these species, we have directly tested a key assumption on wild tropical mammals in a relatively non-invasive manner.

We've demonstrated that by using the latest sensor technologies we can test big hypotheses about the evolution, psychology and behaviour of animals in their natural environment. (Ben Hirsch is a Senior Lecturer in Zoology and Ecology, at James Cook University)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, June 2, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon sextile Sun on your solar return chart. It is going to be a very good year ahead. Your name and fame will spread far and wide. And you will be popular among your peers and superiors. You will also get good job offers. Your business too will flourish. Financial position will remain stable. You will make investments wisely and it will reap you rich dividends. Those in politics, academics, media related industry and social service will do well. And will get acclaim too. You can also join some business association/confederation too and could be facilitated publicly. Your relation with your parents will be wonderful. And you may receive some legacy from them too. Even children will bring joy and perform well in academics. And will get admission in courses/institutions of their choice.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for projects at work and your job environment teeming with activity. You take small yet sure steps towards your financial goals. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful. If you have children, they may need more discipline than they previously did. You may find your children at an age that requires more attention and or structure. There are some contentious issues that are laid to rest as you tackle them and take a bold stand. Health needs some attention.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You may have to make some critical decisions due to situations in your life that force you to make choices; they could even be between career and family goals. Some of you may be promoted or your career takes a new direction. The challenge is to find a healthy balance-to improve home life, while at the same time tending to your career needs. Romantic and personal relations would be more practical than fun. For some, a romantic relationship stabilizes and becomes more serious. For some you will meet a new romantic interest who is perhaps more younger and energetic as compared to you. Some changes in your social circle have been occurring of late, and you meet new and unusual people.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) New friendships are likely to emerge this time, supportive and easygoing ones. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you are indicated. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. Don't allow personal feelings to influence professional decisions. An opportunity or investment to make quick gains in on the cards but analyze data at hand before you invest. Energy is high and things happen swiftly.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You would be blessed with good health, love in relations and harmony at the work place. You give and receive affection and love from friends and relatives. You connect with old friends and business associates. Being open and receptive, you attract opportunities which hitherto seemed out of reach. You desire to learn and improve on your practical skills. Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you that enable you to quicken the pace at your workplace. Tension could run high and reach an emotional peak. Do not get carried away without first getting the facts. Yoga and walking would prove to be beneficial.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your social life will likely increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful people who could prove to be helpful as they extend a helping hand. Matters related to universities, higher education, organized religion, publishing, legal affairs, and foreign interests proceed smoothly. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training or further your education. Happiness and fulfillment through close friendships and relationships is indicated. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to aim for a sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) The planetary combination tends to change your outlook on life, perhaps stimulated by travel. Some changes in your social circle have been occurring and this brings about a new awareness. You are more determined to achieve your

personal goals, and more strategic in the manner you go about doing so. New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously. New projects excite you but remember that bringing them to a completion is just as important. A little attention on fitness and health related programs would be helpful.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) During this period money matters come into focus for you. You would adopt a realistic approach to business and finance because. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement, professional activities, during the week. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is more intense. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. You look to networking to leverage on your contacts. You may be quick to anger and could antagonize some whom you want to win over.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This is a time which is good for money, status and for enhancing your standing. Your entire focus shifts in this direction. You take on new responsibilities, but enjoy the challenges it presents. Your belief systems and personal philosophies are especially important to you, but do not often coincide with your methods. This dichotomy will inculcate new attitudes towards finances, and social relationships before you strike a balance. It's an excellent time for travel, higher education and communications. The family is supportive and helps you look at the larger picture.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You may feel the need to be appreciated by family members, and the need for togetherness with others this week. Events are such that you move towards a more objective approach to your life and you cultivate true friendships. It is a time when we need to let go of things that have a future. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. Others might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You would stand alone, take action and start afresh during this period.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would be able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility in personal and professional relations. You encounter people who are very considerate and understanding. You are also likely to form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You are in touch with your more sensitive and spiritual qualities. You have to maintain a positive attitude and face life in a positive way. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and profit.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) At this time you feel on top in domestic issues and spend quality time with people you care about and in activities that are rejuvenating. You tend to be traditional and restrictive in family matters and may have to face opposition of younger ones. It's time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Your unselfishness and willingness to listen will help boost your magnetic appeal. Your professional skills wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. You need to tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than trust upon others. You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. You come across as especially smooth and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. A business venture could be gainful if you are willing to lend it some energy. You are involved in multiple tools of creativity you possess. A gentle and softer approach can resolve an old conflict.

How genes shape birdsong, even when birds grow up far from home

With the arrival of spring, a timeless ritual begins anew: male birds fill the air with song, seeking to attract mates and defend their territories from other competing males.

But there is a lot we still don't understand about how birds learn which sounds to sing. A latest study offers new insights and suggests genes may play a more important role than scientists realised.

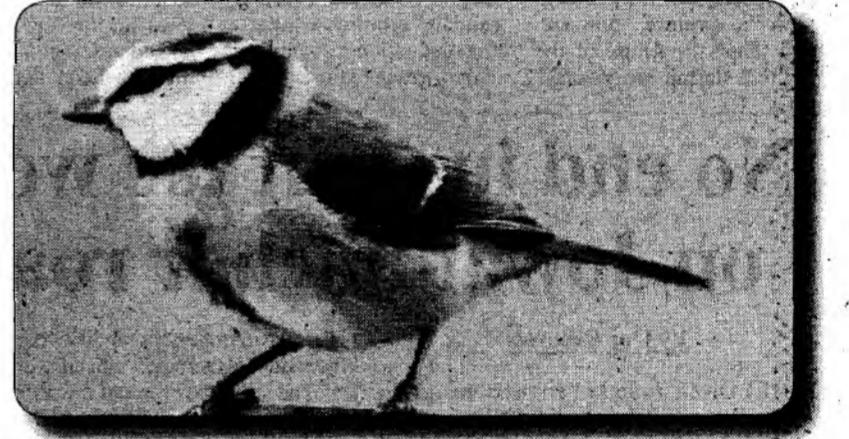
In nearly half of the world's bird species, young birds learn by imitating the songs of adults. As birds learn songs from one another, mistakes inevitably happen, leading to variation in songs between populations of the same species, similar to the formation of dialects in human languages.

Female birds usually prefer males that sing songs typical of the local population, as it may show that they are well adapted to the nearby environment. Additionally, songs are crucial for defending territories. Male birds singing foreign songs often struggle to hold onto territories against local competitors.

This potential role as a mating and social barrier is why there has been a long-standing hypothesis that song differences can drive the formation of a new species.

However, scientists don't yet fully understand what happens to these song differences when birds move between populations. Imagine you're a local bird, and a newcomer arrives singing a foreign song. What's to stop you from learning this new song? If enough local birds learn the songs of newcomers, it could erase the song differences between populations, and thus the mating barrier.

But birds tend to only learn songs from their own species, even when they are exposed to the birdsong of other species. This suggests that birds have genetic predispositions guiding them to learn only "appropriate" songs. So far, these genetic predispositions have only been shown to limit song learning from different species.



This raises an interesting possibility. Could these genetic predispositions also restrict song learning within the same species - and could it explain why some song differences are maintained across different populations of the same species? There are a few lab-based studies that have explored this idea. But it has rarely been tested in the wild, where birds are exposed to songs from different populations and species.

That's why researchers wanted to see whether these lab results would hold true if they took the test into the field.

Into the wild

In the spring seasons of 2017-2019, we translocated eggs of pied flycatchers (a small migratory songbird that breeds widely across Europe) from their nests in the Netherlands to a population in Sweden. The researchers carefully transported these eggs to their new home, where they were placed in Swedish nests and eventually, raised by Swedish parents. Come winter, these translocated birds fledged and made the long journey to their wintering grounds in Africa, along with their Dutch and Swedish counterparts. With the return of spring, they flew back to Sweden, now as adults with fully formed songs, ready to find potential mates.

The songs of these birds were recorded and compared them to the songs of their local Swedish envi-

ronment where they were raised. The research team also compared them to songs of their ancestral Dutch population. Overall, songs of translocated males resembled songs of the Swedish population.

This came as no surprise, since it was known that social learning plays a crucial role in song development for pied flycatchers. However, it was discovered that translocated males did not just learn any Swedish song element - they learned those elements most similar to their ancestral Dutch population. This meant their songs did not completely overlap with Swedish ones but resembled both Swedish and Dutch songs. This suggests that the translocated males are genetically predisposed to learn songs of their ancestral Dutch population.

These findings show how genetic differences within a species can effect cultural change. The researchers think that as songs continue to diverge between these two populations, the genetic predispositions should also become more distinct. Eventually, birds from the local population may not recognise immigrants from other populations as part of their own species as regional variations tend to become more pronounced over time. This co-evolution between genes and songs may reduce the likelihood of birds from different populations mating with each other, driving the formation of new species. (The Conversation)

"I never learn anything talking. I only learn things when I ask questions."

—Lou Holtz

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 292 SHILLONG, MONDAY, JUNE 3, 2024

Of exit polls

THE exit poll results indicate that the BJP-led NDA would have a consecutive third term in power at the Centre. The luxury of political stability for India as a nation could be a matter for celebration especially as this is a noisy democracy with a history of political disruptions. The two terms of the Narendra Modi-led government principally earned its spurs for the political stability that it provided to the nation with a reasonably satisfactory management of the economy as well. While the nation moved forward in these years, the momentum was not all-encompassing. Several sectors other than infrastructure continued to ail, as for instance the all-important industrial/manufacturing sector. Systems kept weakening as is evident in the growing corruption in bureaucracy and regional politics, while the judiciary continued its drag in matters of effective and speedy disposal of cases. The growing spectre of joblessness, as a result of the weakening of the industrial sector, was also cited as a serious issue that was feared to undercut Modi's attempt to win a third term. But, it would appear that in the absence of a cohesive, dependable and self-assertive opposition, the people were left with no other choice.

If according to the exit polls the BJP-led NDA would win the peoples' mandate on June 4, the way forward for it is obviously to form the next ministry. In all probability, Narendra Modi could return as Prime Minister. Ideally, as in the American system, the PM's post in India too should be limited to two terms so that the nation refreshes itself with a new leadership. This is not to under-rate the strengths of Modi as an administrator. Modi would soon be 74 and close to the 75-year age-bar he appreciably introduced for leadership since 2014. This may have a bearing on the swearing in of the new Prime Minister, even as Modi remains as the undisputed and most-powerful name in the saffron edifice today. A search for his successor would likely begin sooner or later. Within the government itself, there's a strong second line. Outside, there are those like Yogi Adityanath who has proven his mettle as an efficient regional administrator. Or, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, for that matter.

For the Congress, however, its Nehru-family fixation would continue. Again as per the exit polls the INDIA alliance appears to have done better so it can rightly assert its claims for the Leader of Opposition post this time. Even in the face of a hat-trick victory, the BJP and Modi might feel a sense of embarrassment if the party's numbers in Parliament come down this time. Some opinion polls project a better performance for the party this time, which, if it happens, would be a huge credit for the BJP and Modi himself.

Can We Trust the MDA Govt with the Environment?

By HH Mohrmen

Come World Environment Day (WED) and the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance Government will make a bold claim of initiating new programs or projects to protect and preserve the environment. Conrad K. Sangma the Chief Minister will wax eloquent at the WED celebration about the different government initiatives to conserve the environment, but scratch the surface a little bit and the public will see the real picture. The question is can the people of the state really trust the MDA to protect the environment? The MDA government is obviously not even trying to improve forest cover; instead they are destroying even the forest we inherited from our forefathers. The question is not what happened to the million saplings that this government claimed to have planted, but what have they done with the legacy forest that we have inherited.

State forest is holding only 1145.19 sq km or 5.10% of forest cover in the state, and we are hoping that the government will try to increase the forest cover in the state but unfortunately, that is not what is happening. This government is removing even the existing virgin forest bit by bit.

Balpakram National Park

Balpakram National Park in the south of Garo Hills in Meghalaya, India, sits at an altitude of about 910 m (3,000 ft) close to the international border with Bangladesh. It was inaugurated in December 1987 and provides habitat for barking deer, Asian golden cat, Bengal tiger, marbled cat, wild water buffalo, red panda and Indian elephant. Balpakram means "land of the eternal wind," according to the myth of the Garo people. Balpakram National Park which is also known as the resting place of spirits of the dead, covers an area of about 220 Sq.km. (Gazette Notification & Date: No.FOR.103/34/354, Dt.15-2-1986). Located about 166 km from Tura and 62 km from Baghmara the District's headquarters, it is the pride of the Garo people, but look at what the MDA government has done to the national park.

Balpakram and highway expansion

It was reported in The Shillong Times issue dated May 23, that the government will cut 2,548 hectares of land from ecological sensitive BNP for expansion of High-

way 4 from Maheshkhola to Karnai. A notification issued by Commissioner and Secretary of Forest & Environment Department stated that the government in exercise of the power conferred under sub section (6) of Section 35 of Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 and after consultation with the standing committee of the National Board of Wild Life, the government authorizes the Chief Wildlife Warden, Meghalaya to grant permit for diversion of 2,548 hectares of land within the BNP. Now isn't this intrusion into the animal habitat? The Chief Minister has time and again spoken about the Sustainable Development Goals and the state government's effort to achieve the goal by 2030, but can destroying the ecological sensitive zone be a sustainable act?

BNP and UNESCO World Heritage site

It is well known that Balpakram National Park is home to wide species of plants and animals. The website stated that its vegetation consists of subtropical, grassland, bamboo forest, tropical deciduous trees and carnivorous plants like the pitcher-plant and Drosera. It also mentioned that species recorded include Indian elephant, chital deer, wild water buffalo, red panda, Bengal tiger, and marbled cat. The rivers and lakes in the wildlife reserve are home to various species of birds. The BNP is therefore a fit case for inclusion in the world famous list of places with special status.

It was reported a few years back that the Central government of India has nominated the Garo Hills Conservation Area (GHCA), straddling South and West Garo Hills district in Meghalaya, as a World Heritage Site, which includes Balpakram National Park. The park has received an honour of having been listed in UNESCO World Heritage tentative list. The question is what will happen to the status now? When a large chunk of land is carved out of the eco zone, can the BNP still be a contender to the important list?

Narpuh Wild Life Sanctuary and Saipung Reserve

The government has not only failed in the protection and preservation of the BNP, but it has even failed in protecting the other reserved forests, wildlife sanctuaries and other sensitive zones

under the control and management of the state government. There were reports of encroachment into the forest land in the Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary and the Saipung reserve and maybe in the Nokrek biosphere reserve too. If this is indeed the case then can the state even claim to still have in its control 1145.19 sq km or 5.10% of forest cover in the state.

How do we deal with our waste?

The State not only failed in preserving and protecting the forest, but it has failed in dealing with waste which is another important issue in the sustainable development goals. In the same issue of The Shillong Times which reported about BNP, there is also a report about the status of Marten dumping ground in Shillong which was opened in 1983.

It was reported that on an average 140 tons of waste is being dumped at the ground on a daily basis and it is overflowing. Segregation of waste at source is not happening as localities outside the city are not cooperating. People are not aware of different rules and regulations on waste and not even the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016. The Chief Minister claimed that the government has already embarked on ways to deal with legacy waste at Marten, but the plan is yet to see the light of day.

Condition of the water in the Myntdu River

Rivers in the state are not in good health. Recently it was reported that the condition of two rivers, Umiew in East Khasi Hills, and Ganol in Garo Hills is critical and that water sources of these rivers are rapidly drying up. This should be a major cause for concern, especially as Umiew, Umtrew and Ganol are important rivers in the state. The pertinent question is about water supply to Jowai, another important town of the state. The National Green Tribunal based on the test conducted by Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board, has issued an order with regards to the water supply in Jowai. The order states that, as per the report prepared by the MSPCB, the NGT has found that the health of the river Myntdu is seriously compromised due to its high acid content. Human interference is causing the river to deteriorate, and

excessive siltation is causing the river size to reduce. It was also reported that the water is also not potable due to the disposal of untreated waste and sewage.

Myntdu is still the major source of drinking water for the town

Before the end of 2022 just before the election, with so much fanfare the Umgot water supply was inaugurated by the government. What the residents of the town are not aware of is that despite the completion of the new water supply project, Jowai continues to rely on the Myntdu, for its daily water needs. Myntdu water supply project, which is pumped from Mupiah, supplies the town with 4,086 MLD of water (RTI reply No. EE/PHE/Elect/JWI/Estt. 21/2022-23/1075 dated December 23, 2022). The much-hyped Umgot water supply, on the other hand, supplies only 1.486 MLD of water to the town, which is only about one fourth of the total amount of water supplied to the town (Ibid. RTI). The Myntdu water supply project continues to be the main source of water for the people of Jowai, as it supplies more than fifty percent of the town's water requirements.

Hon'ble High Court Order

It may be reminded that the High Court of Meghalaya in its order in PIL No. 10 of 2019, has prohibited any construction of a permanent nature within 50 metres from the mean high flood level of Umiam Lake in Ri Bhoi District. The order further stated that the matter is no longer limited to Umiam Lake but has extended to other water bodies and rivers in the state. Additionally, it was reported that the Meghalaya High Court has ordered the Autonomous District Council to take action to maintain the water bodies' purity. The question is how can the PWD allow construction of roads along the river Myntdu? Isn't this a case of government agencies failing to implement the court order? Isn't this a case of contempt of court? This Government will be remembered for hitting the last nail in the coffin of the river Myntdu.

In conclusion Conrad K. Sangma has not only failed to "walk the talk" that he once promised to walk from his residence to the Chief Minister's Secretariat at least once a week, but he has failed on all fronts when it comes to protecting the environment. The Government has also failed in implementing the SDGs in the State.

Combating Drugs and Crime

By D Pakyntein

Every drug user is eager to quit, but finds it difficult to do so. Once I attended a training programme, conducted by the National Academy of Customs, Indirect Taxes and Narcotics (NACIN) Mumbai. All trainees were expecting that senior IPS/IRS/Customs officers would be the trainers and lecturers. Instead, our trainers were psychiatrists, doctors, specialists, experts, and scientists. Here we learnt that any person who has consumed 100% pure heroin on more than three occasions is an addict and it will be very difficult for the person to quit without proper medical treatment.

Heroin in the market is not always pure when tested. To boost profits, dealers or smugglers usually mix it with other substances like soda, glucose, paracetamol,

through. Therefore, it must be perfectly recorded on the spot. A slight error of recording the date, time, place will be noticed. It must be understood that a voluntary statement is more powerful than a questioner's statement in any court of law. When an accused is produced, in court he/she will be sent to 14 days judicial custody. In many cases, it is noticed that judges must wait for an IO/lawyer to come after the 14-day judicial custody or they never attend the court at all. Hence the accused is being sent to custody repeatedly.

Delayed receipt of Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) reports is another drawback. One public witness says something; another says something else results in delay in filing a chargesheet.



caffeine, rat poison or any white powder which is more dangerous than heroin itself. Heroin consumers usually spend approximately between Rs.500-2000 a day, depending upon the number of months and years they have consumed. It will cost the same amount or per person per day to be de-addicted. I believe that no parents can afford to spare this amount of money every day. Hence this pushes drug users to become drug smugglers.

At this critical juncture in our history when drug use is on the upswing in our state how do parents detect whether or not their children are drug users. I would like to share some tips with parents.

The date and time of arrest warrant must be accurate else the case falls flat. Also in many cases important sections were not properly followed, like section 109 CrPC 1973, section 67 of NDPS Act 1985 section 25 of the Indian Evidence Act 1872. The team of officers conducting the search should search the person in-charge of the premises or these lapses will create doubts/confusion in a courtroom.

As per section 42 of the NDPS Act, 1985, only authorized officers (not all with specific ranks are empowered to search or arrest. Yes, we all want to combat drugs and crime, but there is a limit to doing something

A day without drugs for a regular user will make the person sweat or have chills; have diarrhoea; stomach cramps and muscle ache. They also exhibit strange/unusual behaviours. When medicines are missing, there is a possibility that the children are into drugs.

When we notice that expensive items are missing from the house it's time to observe the behaviour of children. A day without drugs for a regular user will make the person sweat or have chills; have diarrhoea; stomach cramps and muscle ache. They also exhibit strange/unusual behaviours. When medicines are missing, there is a possibility that the children are into drugs. It's important to throw away expired or unused medicines. Those who are eager to quit should seek help. There is no need to feel ashamed or afraid.

Those addicted to drug use and smuggling should not wait till they are arrested and jailed for many years or after spending lakhs of rupees to defend themselves. Under section 64A of the NDPS 1985, people addicted to small quantities of narcotic drugs can volunteer for treatment. This is a golden opportunity that should not be missed. Potter Net TV shows how addicts can change their lives.

It is not easy for any court of law to sentence/convict any accused person, and not easy for any investigating agency to blindly arrest anyone. There are many reasons why an accused person gets bail and gets away. Few lapses must be corrected. The first page in a case file is always the panchnama, where a special NDPS judge will peruse

good in society. When an NGO gets accurate information that a person has drugs in his person or premises or vehicle they should inform the authorized investigating agencies and not try and accost the drug peddler themselves. If a drug peddler is intercepted, the best they can do is to detain a person in camera and inform the authorized agencies. Such NGO or individuals will be rewarded handsomely depending on the purity of the drugs. Of course, they will also be rewarded for intercepting those peddling Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) also and the identity of the informer is kept secret. Unless the seizure is made by authorised persons a court of law will not accept the statement of any person/NGO who does the search and seizure of a vehicle carrying drugs or who searches a home of a suspected drug peddler because the drugs were not lawfully recovered from the person, premises, or vehicle.

We live in an imperfect world and a small error detected by top-notch defence lawyers will blow the case apart and the drug kingpin will walk away unpunished. In this endeavour to tackle drug abuse and smuggling I wish the Police/ Investigation Agencies/NGOs all the best.

Letters to the Editor

Annual Academic Day: The Missing Ingredient in School Education

Editor, In many schools annual sports day is celebrated with great enthusiasm, showcasing athletic talents and promoting physical health, teamwork and discipline. However, in the midst of all these events, one wonders, why there aren't similar celebrations for academic successes?

The absence of annual academic functions in many schools is a topic worthy of consideration. Unlike sports events, academic achievements are typically acknowledged through more subdued manner such as report cards or parent-teacher meetings. There is a great disparity with the way schools celebrate sporting events and the way schools acknowledge academic achievements.

School plays a crucial role in shaping the future of students and needs to provide a balanced education that focuses both on physical developments and intellectual growth. A balanced emphasis on both aspects ensures all round development of students and prepares them for future challenges. By observing an academic day, schools ensure that intellectual achievements are valued as much as athletic ones.

Academic successes often come after persistent effort,

dedication and hard work. Celebrating such achievements publicly not only acknowledges the hard work of those successful students but also sets a standard for other students to follow. Such recognitions can be a powerful motivator for other students to strive for academic success. It can inspire students to take their studies more seriously and create an environment where learning is valued and pursued with enthusiasm. It can encourage students to think critically and creatively and promote love for learning.

An annual academic function can also give opportunity for those students who are not athletically gifted but possess extraordinary intellectual abilities. Some students may excel in sports, while others may excel in academic disciplines such as mathematics, science, literature and the arts. Honouring academic successes ensures that students with intellectual talents received recognition they deserve.

Academic skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and analytical abilities are important for success in higher education. By focusing on academic skills, schools can better prepare students for future challenges. It will not only motivate students to go for higher education but will also equip them with necessary skills and knowledge to be successful.

An annual academic day can also give an opportunity to involve community and

parents in students' education. When the community and parents are involved in school education, students are more likely to feel supported and motivated to succeed. Such involvement in school can ultimately lead to increased academic success. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for parents to take an active role in their children's academic progress and in their intellectual development.

Organizing an annual sports day requires space, equipment, and coordination, but it's often perceived as a more straightforward endeavour compared to an academic annual function. Planning an annual academic function might require more creativity, resources, and logistic considerations.

Despite these challenges, there's merit in reconsidering the importance of academic achievements and finding ways to celebrate them more prominently. By highlighting academic accomplishments through annual functions or similar events, schools can reinforce the value of education and motivate students to excel academically.

An annual academic day not only celebrates academic achievements but also fosters a love for learning, creativity and encourages holistic development among students and prepares students for future success.

Yours etc.,
Dr Sengkhom Marak &
Dr Debabrata Das
Tura

Euphemisms for disability

Editor, I used to look at changes in adjectives in addressing those with disabilities. The change from 'disabled' or 'handicapped' or 'physically challenged' to 'differently abled' or 'specially-abled' is a good thing and a milestone of our evolutionary progress. Then a question comes to my mind whether a person on whom the new adjective is used likes it or not.

I got my answer from the PhraseFinder. According to it, the term 'differently abled' was coined by the US Democratic National Committee in the early 1980s as a more accessible term than handicapped (Or in the UK, disabled). It says that the motivation seems to be an attempt to view the people previously called handicapped in a more positive light and also as need to be seen as politically correct.

But then the website echoes my apprehensions when it says that some have viewed the label as a euphemistic attempt to disguise the difficulties experienced by people who have serious physical or mental handicaps.

The term 'differently abled' or 'specially-abled' sounds good, but it does not narrate the truth. In its efforts to glorify the condition of a person, it totally hides the pain the person is undergoing.

This was the reason why the term 'Harijan' (man of god) had been rejected. Mahatma Gandhi preferred to call Untouchables or Dalits, 'Harijan'. He said, "Not that the change of name brings about any change of status, but one may at least be spared the use of a term which is itself one of reproach." But Dalits rejected the term.

In his book, 'The Untouchable as Himself', anthropologist R. S. Khare quoted a Dalit reformer, who said, "It was a superficial way for Gandhi to resolve his guilt."

Though Gandhiji's intention was good, the term 'Harijan' did not reflect the truth. Women have stopped using the term 'Devi' (goddess) as a suffix to their names for the same reason.

Women did not like the differential gender treatment. Women were glorified as goddesses, and therefore burdened with social scrutiny. But men were allowed to be human beings, even with a licence of "boys will be boys".

Many years ago, maid-servants were called 'jhi' in Bengal. This is a Bengali word which means daughter. Later, the word became an offensive term. It got replaced by 'kajer lok', which means a working person. As a matter of fact, to sugar-coat the truth sounds more offensive. Such an effort only adds insult to injury.

To say lofty words about someone that could be any-

thing but true is nothing but sarcasm and sounds like a tongue-in-cheek remark.

Now, we will return to our main discussion revolving around the term, 'differently abled' or 'specially-abled'. We need to listen to disability activist and Paralympic medalist Elizabeth Wright. On such terms, she said, "Ableists may think that they are being positive and uplifting for disabled people, but in essence it is a mask, a covering up of their own uncomfortable feeling about disability." Interestingly, she echoed what a Dalit reformer told Khare about his views on the term 'Harijan'.

She further explained, "By denying the very term disability we are removing disability from the equation. Society ceases to be the problem. The world doesn't need to be fixed or challenged around ableism because there is nothing to fix. There is nothing to fix because the individual isn't disabled - just differently abled."

Indeed, to sweep the pain and problems of disabled people under the carpet of euphemism is a grave injustice to them.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

"Success is never final, failure is never fatal."

— John Wooden

The Shillong Times

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Day of Reckoning

AFTER a 45 day wait the seven-phase results of the election to the 18th Lok Sabha will be known today. This will also put to rest the assumptions and speculations about the results as the final tally will be known by late evening. Since the last vote was cast on June 1, last exit polls have been doing the rounds and all of them seemingly veered towards the BJP and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Some independent researchers have however contested these exit polls stating that those conducting it have not been transparent with the sample size and random testing methods. They also wondered how these poll analysts could reach the length and breadth of a country as vast as India in such a short while. TMC supremo, Mamata Banerjee has accused the exit polls to have been manufactured in homes much ahead of the elections. While this might be an expression of frustration, many other political observers also feel that this time the exit polls seem overly influenced by Prime Minister Modi's claims and his exaggerated self-image projection.

That said the real counting of votes will give a clear picture of how different social groups have voted, the regional dynamics, and much more. Every news channel will have a panel of experts who will give their views. Although there is today a small section of the media that can be called 'free and fair,' the enlightened section of viewers can make their own conclusions. But India is a diverse country with large sections voting with their emotions and not reason hence they will be inclined to follow their biases and prejudices. The role of social media in this election has been phenomenal. It allowed citizens a free expression of their likes and dislikes about the political parties and candidates. Memes and YouTube videos with points and counterpoints flooded the internet. This election eased the constricted feelings of citizens under a regime that used all avenues to curtail freedom to criticise. Suddenly, the people appeared to have realised the strength of the vote and began to speak out freely. In that sense it was a "normal" election which should help mitigate lurking fears about the future of our democracy.

Coming down to brass tacks, it is evident that the opposition INDIA alliance has not been able to gear itself to take on the BJP and its allies on several issues. The Congress Party was too Modi-focussed. Besides the Party received a setback after its accounts were frozen on some untenable pretext. While Rahul Gandhi has led the charge against his arch rival Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and his attempts at undermining the democratic tenets of this nation, sections of the hoi-polloi supporting the BJP appear to be against the idea of a secular, liberal India and continues to believe that the Congress leans towards Muslims and gives them an unfair advantage in the distribution of the state's scarce resources. PM Modi has unfairly castigated the Muslims in his speeches. Some of these bordered on hate speeches but the Election Commission remained shamefacedly deaf and blind to them. This is also one election where people have seemingly lost faith in the independence of the Election Commission of India because of the manner in which the CEC and his team are selected. As the nation awaits a new Lok Sabha and a new government to take charge, some have voted for change while others have voted for the status quo. That's what democracy is all about.

What's making news

By Albert Thyrniang

Presently the prominent talking points in the media and in private circles are the appointment of Idashisha Nongrang as Meghalaya Director General of Police (DGP), drugs and the indigenous peoples' debate.

The newsmaker Nongrang created history by being the state's first woman and tribal DGP. But it is her distinguished service that took her to the top. Political parties and pressure groups unnecessarily lobbied for the former Director General of Meghalaya, Civil Defence. The NPP in KHADC even credited the chief minister and deputy chief minister for Nongrang's elevation. These entities do not believe in systems. Evidently the 1992 IPS batch officer rose to the pinnacle purely on merit. Neither sex nor ethnicity was responsible for her career growth.

The acting DGP in 2021 assumed office on May 20. She has a fixed two-year tenure to make a difference in the police establishment. On her first day at work she promised to change the hostile perception of the public on the police. She has allotted time for the public to personally meet her. The lawkeepers are often branded as a brute force against protesting groups but a meek one at the border. Videos of tear gas shelling and lathi charge on teachers at Secretariat vicinity and women at Lumshong village; Jaintia Hills were created along with visuals of police personnel running for cover from catapult attacks in the border village of Lapanggap. The new DGP could turn the police into a people friendly force.

Notably the newly appointed DGP also vowed zero tolerance towards extortion of trucks on highways. She even assured extreme measures to curb it. She claims the frequent and blatant cases of extortion are worrying police officials and the secretariat as well. The topmost officer might firmly deal with extortionists in the notorious stretch of Shillong bypass for example. She could be tough against members of pressure groups and thugs who indulge in the unholy business but, it is feared, she has to also rein in her own personnel who give in to the temptation of making quick bucks from plying trucks. Once while traveling from Umiam to Jowai, at Mawryngkneng a police man with a stationary truck on the left side of the road. On the other side was another officer. After we drove past a

co-passenger informed that the police at the right side was keeping watch of the in-coming vehicles. When no one is in sight he would direct his colleague to pocket the money from drivers. It is a daily and nightly affair he revealed. On the way back to Shillong a similar example was noticed at Sohryngkham. Before outward actions, the DGP has to set her own house in order.

News is splashed across all media of pressure groups' operations against drug users and peddlers. The government is on collaborative mode with NGOs, church organisations, educational institutions and village councils to tackle the menace. Some 'offenders' were apprehended by enthusiastic volunteers. According to the social welfare minister, Paul Lyngdoh, Meghalaya's success rate in tackling drugs is 20%, that is, 15% more than the national rate of 5%. I would say, "hold your horses before such jubilation."

It is easy to blame and condemn drug addicts. They need to be treated with compassion. A habit, good or bad is hard to break. An addict cannot give up a habit just like that. This is true of any addiction.

A groups of mothers were complaining, 'Ki kpa ki khun ki dih buaid jan man ka sing. Ngi seng ngi mai ia ki hynrei kim sangeh.' (Our husbands get drunk almost every day. We exhorted them daily but they don't give up alcohol. After a patient hearing this author simply said, "From today don't eat kwai (areca nut and betel leaf) or use tobacco." Surprised they protested, 'Why do you tell us so?' My answer, 'A habit is the same. Before you demand from your husbands to quit drinking, first try to stop the traditional consumption' was my reply. About a week later when I met a couple of them they confessed they could not manage without Kwai. Sometime back an article announced, "KWAI: A difficult balance between cultural practices & public health concern." Khasis and Jaintias consider kwai consumption as unique to them. There is a legendary story to back the claim. Folks justify kwai consumption insisting it to be part of the local culture. But kwai consumption is not unique to the natives of Khasi-Jaintia Hills. In Garo Hills too people are fond of kwai. In Assam and other north eastern states and in the

rest of India too kwai is consumed in other forms. Just for the record kwai (areca nut), the fruit of the palm species called Areca catechu is native to the Philippines. Betel vine (leaves) probably originates from Indonesia.

Kwai consumption is habit-forming and unhealthy. But its 'cultural' connection makes consumers continue with the habit. The practice also incurs unnecessary expenditure. For any social gathering kwai is a priority. A person told this writer, 'If kwai consumption is stopped what about those selling them and the growers? Well, areca nuts are used to manufacture the best quality paints. As for commercial uses of betel leaves stimulants, antiseptics and fresheners come from the Piperaceae family. So, no one will not go out of work.'

In relation to drugs we look at kwai as an intoxicant. If we want our youths to cease their habit (taking drugs) parents should challenge themselves to give the kwai eating habit. Likewise parents who smoke and drink should stop doing so for the sake of providing good examples to the young. Only then will we have the moral authority to advise adolescents not to fall prey to drugs. Parents can proudly say to their children, 'See we managed to give up kwai, drinks and smoke. You can also come out of drug use. The Latin proverb says, "Verba docent, exempla trahunt," meaning - Words instruct, illustration leads.

A flurry of articles and letters have been gracing this page debating on indigenous people vis-à-vis conversion. One letter specifically states that Christians are no longer indigenous. It is true Christianity discards many aspects of traditional beliefs and culture. But why target Christianity alone? What about Islam and Hinduism for example? Conversion is conversion! Why the discrimination? Christianity reached India in the first century itself. Islam came with the CE 712 Arab invasion. Today in Meghalaya, the plains in Garo Hills are dominated by 'Muslims.' In Laban (a Shillong locality) there is a huge glass mosque - the only one in India. Some pockets of Ri Bhoi districts have been 'Islamised'. So a section of the indigenous population too has embraced Islam.

What about converts to Hinduism? If Christians and

Muslims are no longer indigenous so too Hindu converts for the reason that indigenous religions and Hinduism are distinctly different. A misconception is created and propagated that most tribes in the North East have converted to Christianity. This is not true. Look at Assam. Most of the plain tribes have identified themselves as Hindus. They were not originally so. The Meiteis in Manipur and the Ahoms in Assam are prominent examples. Many among the Bodo, Deori, Sonowal, Mising, Hajong, Rabha, Karbi, Dimasa and other tribes have come to call themselves Hindus. Many of them celebrate Hindu festivals. They have lost their own culture. They have forgotten their own language. If these converts to Hinduism remain indigenous so also Christian converts.

It is Christianity that preserves cultures. In Assam this is evident. Hill tribes who are influenced by Christianity are more vibrant in their culture than the plain tribes who have been influenced more by Hinduism. With regards to language it is Christians who have contributed towards preserving and developing tribal languages through publications of dictionaries, grammar books, text books, religious books and other literary works. So how can Christians not be indigenous?

The CUET fiasco too was in the media glare. The CUET fiasco in Meghalaya is because NEHU caters to the majority of students in the state. Practically all the colleges are affiliated to the central university. There was no such rush in Assam for example because the states has its own universities. The neighbouring state recently declared that CUET is not necessary for admissions. Meghalaya can't afford to follow suit. In our state students who miss CUET may drop out or forgo a year at least. CUET has also reversed roles. Till class XII the poor and the rural students study in ill-equipped government schools while the rich are educated in posh private institutions. CUET has ensured that the rich have easy access to central institutions while the poor are forced into private universities against their means or give up on their dreams altogether. Until the state government is ready with alternatives CUET should be out. Like the Tamil Nadu government an Assembly resolution against CUET should be adopted.

Earth Care: Learning from Tribal Communities

By Barnes Mawrie

We all know that tribal communities maintain a close relationship with nature whom they revere as their mother. The famous movie Avatar demonstrates the elemental relationship that the Navi tribe had with their natural environment. In fact, the director, James Cameron wanted the movie to be pro-environmentalist. In an interview he said, "because that was my purpose in making the film. I wanted to make an environmentally conscious mainstream movie. And to be fair to 20th Century Fox, any of the other studios would have said the same thing. Fox ended up being enormously supportive and wrote this huge check. But they would have been much more comfortable if I had eliminated what they called the 'tree-hugging' elements." Of course, the movie depicts an imaginary Navi world, but the message is clear that we human beings are primarily connected to our natural world. Unfortunately, modern civilization has distanced humans more and more from the rest of creation. The tribal people are always aware that they live in the bosom of Mother Nature and therefore they would do nothing to hurt her. Some of the most evident factors that prove this traditional attitude of tribal people towards nature are:

a) Communion with nature - The tribal people cannot imagine an exist-

ence outside their natural environment. Damage to Mother Nature causes grief to them. In the words of Wangari Maathai, founder of the Kenya Green Belt Movement, "I am concerned about the wounds and bleeding sores on the naked body of the earth. Have we not seen long-term effects of these bleeding sores? The famines? Poverty? Chemical and nuclear accidents? We are responsible directly or indirectly. We are strangling the earth." This is the feeling of tribal communities all over the world as they witness the ruthless exploitation of nature.

b) Man-nature interdependence - The tribal people are always conscious that they depend so much for their survival on Mother Nature. They believe in a mutual interdependence between humans and nature. Tribal communities are agrarian by occupation and so they depend largely on the bountifulness of nature. Tribal myths and folktales speak of the interaction between plants, animals and people as well as with their natural relief and they affect each other constantly. The awareness of this interdependence inspires respect and love for nature. Thus tribal people would always converse and seek permission from nature for anything that they require from her.

c) Sacredness of nature - It is a universal belief among all indigenous tribes of the world that nature is sacred and ought to be respected and revered. The tribes of Northeast India for example, believe in the existence of nature spirits who reside on mountains, in rivers, forests, caves, lakes etc. Such perception makes them revere nature all the more. In fact, among the tribal people, nature plays a sacramental role. This is evident in the many myths and stories where things of nature, animals, birds, insects, trees, plants, etc., become God's agents to rescue humanity especially among the tribes of Northeast India. For the Cherokee Indians the eagle is considered a sacred bird because it flies high and

delivers the prayers to the creator. For the Tlingit of Alaska the raven is a sacred bird and is considered the creator of the stars and the moon. The Santals of India consider the tortoise as the creator of land in their creation myth. The practice of instituting sacred groves among many tribes of India, is another manifestation of the sacredness of nature. Our Khasi ancestors were also wise and realized the necessity of preserving the natural resources and nature's biodiversity for future generations. They did this by instituting these groves and declaring them as sacred and inviolable. Everything that are found in these groves, the flora and fauna etc., are never to be violated in any manner.

d) Sense of ecological justice - The tribal people in general maintain a very just and upright attitude towards their natural environment. They treat things of nature as they would treat their fellow beings. Thus the sense of fundamental equality with other beings in nature is very strong in them. They communicate with elements of nature as if with fellow humans. Among the Khasis of Meghalaya there is a belief that in the age of innocence, both men and beasts spoke the same language and even kept a common market (lewli-ura). Tribal people still maintain a mutual respect with the animal world and there was



no encroachment into the other's territory. There was never a wanton destruction of the natural environment. The Nagas for example, maintain a harmonious relationship with nature and they would cut down trees or hunt animals just for what they need and not for commercial purposes. Today the ecological crisis of climate change can be largely ascribed to the weakening of ecological justice.

e) Protectors of the environment - All around the world, the indigenous tribes continue to be protectors of the ecology. However, it is a war waged against the powerful economic players. Through legal processes many of them have been able to safeguard their habitats. In India, tribal communities, through the constitutional provisions under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, are able to protect their lands from encroachment by outsiders. It is true that tribal communities all over the world have been protectors of the natural environment since times immemorial. Their symbiotic existence with their natural environment, is still an inspiration for the world today in fighting the adverse impacts of climate change. However, the encroachment of the so-called "civilization" has corroded tribal values like territes. Today, many tribal people have fallen victim to materialism and consumerism and in exchange, they have destroyed the integrity and purity of Mother Nature.

In conclusion we can ask the question: Can tribal communities still boast of their communion with Mother Nature and can the world look up to them for inspiration? In the face of threats from climate change like surging temperature, flash floods, drought and famine, tribal communities can play a very positive by showing the world how "humans are elementally connected to Mother Nature and that maintaining a healthy and respectful relationship with her, is the only way out of this existential danger."

Letters to the Editor

State leadership will determine quality of State University

Editor, The establishment of Captain Williamson Sangma State University, Tura is a welcome step, yet it needs to tread cautiously and cannot be over-ambitious in the immediate future. Meghalaya with the dubious distinction of being a State with perennial financial crunch combined with misplaced priorities, has to be pragmatic since a university's annual expenditure can range anywhere between fifty to a few hundred crores annually. Understandably, there are deep concerns on maintainability and sustainability of the University under the State Government. It can start with few departments and should not think of affiliating colleges for at least 10 years. The Government should allow the University to settle down and shape up. Here the newly set up Education Commission of Meghalaya can play an important role in stabilizing it over the years. The options should be given to colleges who they want to affiliate with eventually. It will be very unfortunate to see colleges moving away from NEHU - a 51 years old first Central University of North-Eastern region, to a newly set up State university, which is yet to be tested. We don't have to go too far. Let's have a

look at the model Assam has adopted and improvise upon it. Assam has 2 Central Universities and 19 State Universities. In this regard, the Meghalaya College Teachers' Association (MCTA), the Principal's Council and civil societies will also have to play a vital role.

The new University will require a Vice Chancellor with clear vision, compassion, dedication and knowledge with academic and professional leadership and one who does not possess the mentality of a primary school teacher. Of course, the same is expected from Vice Chancellors of every university. In the next 10 years or so, the new State University should stabilize itself for a steady growth by creating infrastructure, recruiting faculty and non-teaching staff, initiating courses and design curricula based on the needs and aspirations of the people of Meghalaya. The entire university should be digitalized so that all transaction can be done online-right from obtaining forms to payment of fees, obtaining mark sheets, certificates, etc. without the need to visit the campus which will be a great service to people living in far-flung areas, particularly those from the lower income groups. Once the university becomes well-established and tested, then it can think of affiliating colleges under it. As the saying goes-haste makes waste.

It is natural that there will be some competition between NEHU and Williamson Sangma State University

but it should be complementing each other rather than competing against each other in the larger interests of the people of Meghalaya. Some examples include starting new courses that are relevant in current times with good job prospects which NEHU does not offer, or, create expertise required for the economic growth of Meghalaya through well-designed programs. In this regard, NEHU too has to pull up its socks. It has earned its brand name through rigorous and dedicated efforts of the former Vice Chancellors, faculty members, students and non-teaching staff since inception but the brand is fast degrading in the last 10-12 years. It has to behave more rationally while dealing with the affiliated colleges. NEHU has to act as a big brother and handhold and treat them as partners in pursuit of academic goals and excellence. It cannot afford to act as the boss of these colleges and force anything on them against their will. It cannot afford to forget that it doesn't own them and as a university they are affiliated to, NEHU needs to provide the academic mentorship and quality control with mutual respect.

The recent debacle in CUET centres in NEHU is the only reason for exemption of the CUET in Meghalaya for admission to UG programs and this doesn't speak well about an experienced university which has stood the test of time over several decades. Similarly, the hasty and haphazard

implementation of NEP 2020 in the undergraduate level without assessing the ground reality and preparedness is another cause of concern among the general public and teaching fraternity alike. IF NEHU doesn't learn from its mistakes and if it keeps repeating errors one after another over a short period of time, then it bound to drive the colleges, students and the general public away from it. Everything is not lost yet and NEHU can regain its brand name provided there is a will for a recovery and the Vice Chancellor has to show the way through immediate corrective actions.

Yours etc, Prof. Lakhon Kma Shillong-4

Modi's second term

Editor, Apropos of the editorial, "Of exit polls," (ST June 3, 2024), all 13 polling agencies in the country in their exit polls result 2024 have predicted on Saturday that the BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would retain power at the Centre for a third straight term, with the BJP-led NDA expected to win with a thumping majority in the Lok Sabha polls 2024. Many exit polls also predicted the BJP improving its numbers from the 303 seats it won in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. If the exit polls prove correct on Tuesday Prime Minister Narendra Modi will become the only Prime Minister after

Jawaharlal Nehru to win three successive terms in the Lok Sabha. Then the next thing to watch is the "NDA's 100 Days Programme" after the budget session which the Prime Minister has asked the bureaucracy to brace up when he returns as the Prime Minister for the third term.

On the economic side, I think the Prime Minister should not encourage freebies as it is bad economics, however cash grants to deserving categories like landless labour and tenants should be encouraged through Direct Benefit Transfer to help the poor and vulnerable people of our country. It will also be interesting to see whether the Constitution will be amended as the BJP led NDA will be having the numbers. Then there are areas which require structural reforms which includes education, employment, environment and police-judicial system which have not been attempted extensively as they are challenging. Programs like Mudra loans and housing initiatives may be scaled up.

Yours etc; VK Lyngdoh, Via email

A simple, respectful response

Editor, I am thankful to Wal-lambi Rani for his letter, "Who wants to abolish the ST status?" ST (June 1, 2024) and to Hammarsing

L Kharhmar for his article, "Khasi by Faith," also dated June 1, 2024, in response to my article in The Shillong Times, "Religion and Khasi Tribal Identity," (ST May 30, 2024), thereby giving me an opportunity to clarify further. The debate on Scheduled Tribe status -vs- religious conversion is an old issue which is still brewing all along not only in Meghalaya but in other parts of India as well. I suggest that Wal-lambi Rani read N.K. Kehar's letter, "Converts to Christianity no longer indigenous" (ST, May 16, 2024), James D's letter, "Is Hindu-dutva influencing ST status-vs-Christian conversion debate?" (ST, May 18, 2024), and Bhogtoram Mawroh's article, "Is religion the basis of indigenous identity?" (ST, May 18, 2024). Hammarsing L Kharhmar's reaction to my article is natural and expected. I would have reacted similarly if I were in his place. Nevertheless, I would like to let him know that I highly appreciate the role played by the Seng Khasi and Sein Raj in guiding the moral and spiritual life of the people because it is irrational to expect that all Khasis would convert to Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, or any other new religion.

Yours etc., Fabian Lyngdoh, Via email

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"Power is always dangerous. Power attracts the worst and corrupts the best."

— Edward Abbey

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Peoples' power

THE half verdict that Modi has managed this election tells us that voters can never be taken for granted. Having set a target of 400 + and finishing at the halfway mark is a big jolt for the BJP. This is especially true because all political pundits and psephologists had put out highly bloated figures as their prediction. Modi may be poised for a historic third successive term but to many this is a pyrrhic victory. Barely a couple of months before elections were announced, the BJP was upbeat and with some justification. Riding on a wave of religious fervour created over the Ram Temple construction at Ayodhya and backed by a wide perception created by the mainstream media, who would have imagined that the BJP would receive such a drubbing in Uttar Pradesh itself. It surely confirms that religious polarisation has its limit. That a large chunk of Hindu voters refused to fall for BJP's brand of political Hinduism should tell Modi that at the end of the day it's the common man's existential issue which has taken precedence over religion.

This split verdict is a stern reminder that India is a plural nation and not everybody is prepared to buy the idea of forced uniformity. Be it the Dravidians along with their neighbouring southern milieu, or small Northeastern tribal states like Meghalaya, Manipur or Nagaland the verdict is clearly against imposition from the Centre. In his third term, the question that should be uppermost in most discerning citizens is: Will Modi learn any lessons and try to win hearts rather than browbeating them will be critical to holding the nation together. The Congress-led INDIA alliance which virtually fought with its hands tied after the Congress Party's accounts were frozen has sprung a surprise. They have put up a creditable fight. No one gave them any chance. Rahul Gandhi was constantly ridiculed beyond proportion. If electoral success is the be all and end all, now that Rahul Gandhi has scored twin successes, at least he should be spared of personal attacks. Decency and civility in public discourses need to be restored and Modi himself should lead from the front.

In what is a lesson in adversity, in the changed political contours, the BJP will now have to rely on its allies for the next five years for its survival – a prospect that Modi did not anticipate with the, "char sau paar," slogan. How well the BJP manages its allies will depend on how much flexibility the party shows. Closer home, the results were not too surprising. Voters of Shillong and Tura constituencies voted for change. The NPP's tie-up with the BJP alienated a large chunk of voters that see the BJP as a fundamentalist, right wing party out to impose its writ on minorities – from the CAA to the UCC and the witch-hunting of Christian minority institutions in the neighbouring Assam. The people have voted and demonstrated their power to bring down the high and mighty. Their mandate must be respected.

Environment Day & Indifference to Forest Management & Protection

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

This year the World Environment Day falls just a day after the declaration of the Lok Sabha elections results. The two newly elected Members of Parliament from Meghalaya will deliberate on various subjects that concern the State and the Nation. Will environmental issues be the priority for them? Or will other issues take precedence?

Environment Day Rituals:

The degraded state of the environment is very alarming and unless some radical measures are taken by every stake holder to arrest this environmental decay, we the Hynniewtreps and Achi people are heading for a disaster sooner than we thought. Nonetheless, Government ministers and officials will still perform their rituals and give pep talks on how to manage and preserve the commons and forests. Also, they will scare us away with their hyperbole and experiences in some G20 summits or Climate Change Conferences which they had attended somewhere in the Universe at the expense of public money, but at the same time lack the commitment to protect and restore our environs which we borrowed from our children.

The Landmark Decision on the Ban of Felling of Trees:

In 1996, the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) along with other citizens, like Kong Patricia Mukhim etc., were co-petitioners seeking a 10-year ban on tree felling and export from Meghalaya in the Shillong Bench of the Gauhati High Court. Simultaneously, the same matter pertaining to forest and environment degradation was filed and heard by the Supreme Court of India in the writ petition entitled, "T.N. Godavarma Thirumulpad vs. Union of India and others". Taking cognizance of the notice mentioned before it, the Supreme Court gave the following orders, "It has been brought to our notice that a PIL matter Civil Rule (PIL) SH No 1 of 1996, Paul Lyngdoh Versus State of Meghalaya pending in the Shillong Bench of the Gauhati High Court which has been filed by the Khasi Students' Union is also a related matter. It is therefore appropriate that the matter is also heard by this Court as a connected matter. In view of the fact that in the matters pending in this Court every facet of the problem throughout the country is under consideration, it is appropriate that no aspect of this matter be considered separately by any Court in any form. Accordingly, we direct the transfer of Civil

Rule (PIL) SH No 1 of 1996 to this Court..."

Thus, the PIL of the KSU was tagged along whereby the Supreme Court deliberated in-depth on the matter and subsequently delivered a significant judgement in the widely known "T.N. Godavarma Thirumulpad vs. Union of India" case in 1996. Among other directions, the Supreme Court gave specific directives to the Northeastern States and the rest of the country in paragraphs 4 and 5 respectively. These can be quoted thus: "There shall be a complete ban on the movement of cut trees and timber from any of the seven Northeastern States to any other State across the country either by rails, roads or waterways..." (para 4) and in para 5 the Court directed "to each State Government to constitute within one month the Expert Committee in order to (i) identify areas which are forests, irrespective whether they are so notified, recognized or classified under any law, and irrespective of the ownership of the land of such forest (ii) identify areas which were earlier forests but stand degraded, denuded or cleared and (iii) identified areas covered by plantation trees belonging to government and those belonging to private persons." Moreover, the Court examined in detail all aspects of the National Forest Policy, the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. It emphasized that the word 'forest' must be understood according to its dictionary meaning of the term irrespective of the nature of ownership and classification thereof.

The Impact of the Ban:

The adverse impact of the ban, especially on the livelihoods of the poor in the State of Meghalaya, was extreme. According to Tiplut Nongbi, "While the judgement is a major victory for environmentalists and wild-life lovers in the city, it came like a bolt from the blue for the poor forest dwellers and indigenous communities of north-east India..." There was a big chunk of rural populace, especially in the erstwhile West Khasi Hills District whose livelihoods were dependent on timber trade. Unfortunately, most of them were not land or forest owners but mere daily wage labourers who worked under big land/forests owners and timber merchants. On the other hand, there were these land/forests owners, who after the ban came together as a consortium (temporary) and explored or rather exploited every bit of "tradi-

tion", like the land holding and land tenure system of the "Jaitbyrniew" and tried to convince every authority on the way that the Khasis as a tribe, have a unique culture. They deliberately did this to save and serve their individual interests and not the "Jaitbyrniew".

In fact, the concept of land in Khasi socio-cultural polity and the idea of commons or community/clan own lands indeed stand in opposition to the interests of timber lobby. Again, we witnessed the trend of coal mine owners coming together in the name of indigenous rights to ownership of land etc to safeguard their business interest during the National Green Tribunal imposition of ban on rat hole mining in 2014.

The Expert Committee Report: A Reflection of Indifference

In 2023 after the amendment to the Forest Conservation Act 1980 was passed a series of petitions were filed before the Supreme Court against the Amendment Act and the matter is pending for hearing in the Apex Court. It has been reported that experts and activists claimed that the Amended Act is diluting the environmental protections for forests. Further, the amendment led to opening vast tracts of forest land (including deemed forests and community forests, which are not officially recorded as forests) to human activities... Therefore, in its interim order the Apex Court directed all States and Union Territories to uphold the definition of forests as stipulated in the 1996 judgement. It also mandated that all States and Union territories must submit the reports of the Expert Committees by March 31. The report must contain a comprehensive record of forests identified by Expert Committees established according to the 1996 Judgement.

In response, the Government of Meghalaya had submitted the report of the Expert Committee vide letter No. MFG.39/51/XXVIII/18,503 Dated March 7, 2024, via the Assistant Inspector General of Forest, Government of India, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. The above-mentioned Report, (which was attached to the letter), is the same Report of the Expert Committee constituted in 1996 in accordance with Para 5 (i), (ii), and (iii) of the Supreme Court's interim directions in Writ Petition Civil No. 202 of 1995.

Although, the land system and multiple power centers in Meghalaya mark the complexity of Forest management and conservation in the State. But the Report of the Expert Committee in this regard is very telling and reflects the lethargy of both the State and community to address the issue.

More than two decades had elapsed since the Expert Committee had worked out a report on behalf of the State of Meghalaya as per the direction of the Apex Court (The Report is available @https://parivesh.nic.in/certificates/forms/Meghalaya_Expert_Committee_Report_newpdf). On perusal of the report, it is quite apparent that no attempt had been made so far to create land and forest records and lay down the policy to regulate the traditional land/forests system in Meghalaya which will result in sustainable development as against the rampage of extensive and extractive mining and deforestation.

The introduction to the Report puts in perspective the magnitude of the lethargy of both the State and community when it comes to the environment. Undoubtedly as stated in the Report, "... In Meghalaya the State has control only a small fraction of the total area and those areas are Reserved forests, Protected forests, National Parks, Sanctuaries, gardens and the records of which are available with the Government. While the remaining areas, the revenue records like in some other states wherein Cadastral Survey of land are updated from time to time are not available in Meghalaya. These areas are under the control of the three Autonomous District Councils".

The Report further states that attempts have been made to source from District Council authorities the approximate figures related to forest areas under their management and control. After a series of meetings, it appears that reliable area figures are not available with them since a regular Cadastral Survey for the entire State has not been conducted. It is also recorded that the Director of Land Records categorically pointed out that Meghalaya is a Non-Cadastral State.

Meghalaya is facing numerous challenges, including pollution, deforestation, and climate change. Therefore, it is essential to evolve and strengthen environmental regulations and practices in favour of conservation of our natural resources of land, rivers and forests for the benefit of all citizens and not just for the elites.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Silence Has Spoken! With the election results now out, one fact is obvious, that the silence of the people has voiced itself through the voting finger. And obviously they were so silent that even the exit polls got them wrong! Why? Because we've never given them an actual voice to speak!

The other day I was asked to speak at the Nirmala Niketan College in Mumbai about, "Giving a Voice to the Voiceless". It seemed as I began to speak, I heard a whisper, "What if, you Bob should not be the speaker here today, but the speaker be we the so called voiceless!"

"What?" I nearly cried out. "What we need Bob," the imaginary voice con-

is not to be the voice of our people but to teach our people to use their voice!"

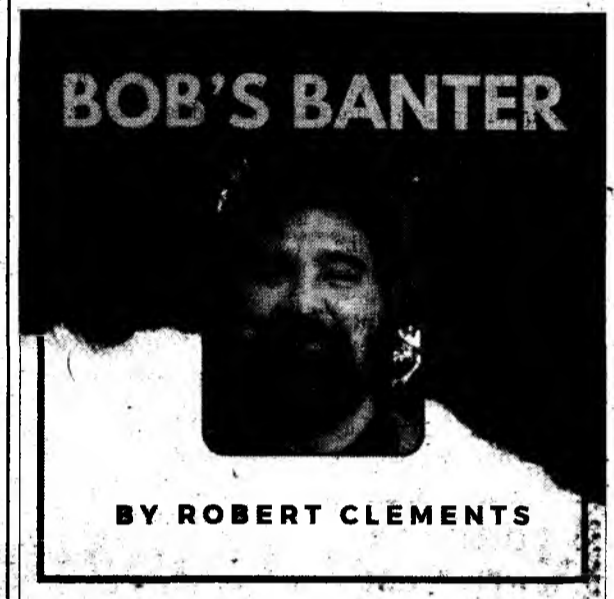
How exactly do you give them a voice? I believe that the one way you and I can do the needful is by opening the windows of opportunity and hope to them? Become a 'window opener-wallah!'"

"Window Opener-Wallah?" you shout across to me, "What exactly do you mean?"

"Ah well," I say, "What happens when you open your windows in the morning after getting up from bed?"

"I let the sunshine in," you say, looking at me hesitantly.

"Right! In one movement of the opening, you let the beauty of the outside come in, after the darkness of the night!"



tinued, "is not you trying to speak for us, but you and your friends equipping, enabling and empowering us the voiceless people of our country to speak for ourselves?"

Well it wasn't really a voice, but suppose that is what the silent ones in our country, the poor and downtrodden are trying to say? That our role is to give them a voice!

What if, instead of a silent billion accepting the dole their masters in Delhi or Mumbai hand over to them, their voices, once freed by us, clamour, demand and receive what is their rightful inheritance, because we equipped them with a voice that would demand their fair and equal share?

Our job I believe is akin to an ENT surgeon or throat doctor, or voice trainer. Our job I believe is to open their mouths, widen their vocal cords, and let them speak.

For this to happen, you and I have a duty: Our job is to remove the shackles that have driven them to silence. To not just show them that our nation is a democracy, not just take the heavy bound Constitution we love brandishing and place it on their laps, saying, 'here this is yours,' but to show them how to use laws in their panchayats, housing societies and workplaces that in watching themselves win, and seeing justice is delivered in these small attempts they will be emboldened to use bigger laws and bigger legal fights for their fair and rightful share to equality and their rightful share of roti, kapada and makan!

Our task is to remove the muzzles placed on them by an oppressive police force. To gradually take away their fear of the police, the fear of government servants and to explain to them what these government servants actually are supposed to be — servants, meant to serve them, not loud-mouthed bullies who want to be served and bribed.

Our job also is to remove the thought from their minds that if they are of a religion which is not of the majority that they have lesser rights, and to explain they have the same rights of any other Indian in this country. Our job is to show them their right to protest! A fundamental right that today unfortunately is branded as activism, and thought of as sedition.

"Yes," I said as I finished my new speech, "Our job

So often looking at the brokenness of people around us, we wonder what role we can play, and I like the example of being a window opener. We don't try to open all the windows, we just open a window near us.

How? You just cater to the needs of that one person in despair, that one person who needs a small bit of financial help, or just your shoulder to cry on. Just open that small window within your reach and let golden rays flow into their lives.

"But Bob," you say, looking at me doubtfully, "That single window I open doesn't help the rest of the world lying broken around me!"

"It does!" When you open that window, others around you see what you are doing. They see you feeding that stray dog looking helpless and desolate outside, and even if they are not dog lovers their hearts also see the change in that animal, and they feel compassion flowing through them.

When you open a window and let the sunshine into someone's life, by just saying a kind word or doing a good deed, it starts an epidemic and soon a contagious movement of window opening follows.

They see the sunshine you have allowed in and they want to bring in the same.

There's another aspect too. I believe that such window openings are also glimpses of heaven.

Because in your kind deed or gesture you are also giving the world a peek of the glory that lies above!

"That," you are actually telling the world, "that bit of sunshine you just felt is just a bit of the warm embrace a God above is willing to envelope all of us with!"

Because a window is actually just a hole in the wall isn't it? A hole that shows us the beautiful outside, and when we actually go out and feel the breeze and see the trees and flowers, we realize what that little peep told us, "There's more outside!"

So be a window opener-wallah to the world! We just saw the silence of our people voicing themselves, now let's open windows for them, and let the sunshine into our country.!

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 or bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Don't take voters for granted!

Editor, The VPP victory in the Shillong Parliamentary seat was predicted by many. For once there was a sort of meeting of minds across the Khasi-Jaintia Hills especially in rural Meghalaya that this time they would send a new MP to Parliament and a worthy one in Dr Ricky Syngkon, a gentleman-politician. The NPP is seen as a party of the 'high level' with no concern for the poor and the downtrodden. This message has spread far and wide and the VPP is seen as a paragon of hope that would cleanse the system of its proclivity to make available the resources of the state to a select few who are enclosed inside a political circumference. People are neither deaf nor blind and may seem powerless because they are poverty-stricken but the vote gives them the power to reward and punish. Politicians tend to forget this lesson that if they can be voted to power they can also be voted to bite the dust. The victory of Congress candidate Saleng Sangma in

the Tura Parliamentary seat too was predicted earlier on. People of Garo Hills wanted a change. People rallied round him right from the campaign period. They want an MP who is available and knows what ails the region. When an MP or MLA is elected repeatedly, he/she invariably takes the voters for granted. This is why Agatha Sangma was voted out and so was Vincent Pala. This election also proves that the Congress party may have been down but is not out and it can resurrect itself under the right leadership and if the party units at the grass-roots level are activated. These units are what the Congress party used to draw its strength from. Sadly they have been left to wither. Now it remains to be seen as to what happens to the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) in Meghalaya. Will it still survive or will the dissidents who abandoned the Congress return to their original place? Much will depend on the Congress High Command which now needs to change tack and renew its commitment to the service of the people. Yours etc., HK Nongnum, Via email

Great Minds on India

Editor, I am honoured to be presented with the book 'Great Minds on India' by Salil Grewal from the man himself. After reading through the book I am impressed by the effort taken by the author to research and compile the views and opinions of so many outstanding scholars, scientists, philosophers and writers from across the globe on the contributions made by ancient India to human civilization in different fields of human activity. Dr. Kalpalatha Guntupalli, Professor, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas, USA, writes about the book, "the book chronicles the worldview of India, not what India thinks of herself". Great personalities such as Albert Einstein, T.S. Eliot, Erwin Schrodinger, Julius R. Oppenheimer, Queen Frederika of Greece, Prof. Arthur Holmes, Bernard Shaw, Barack Obama, Jean Sylvania Bailly, are just a few among others, who have expressed their opinions as compiled in this book. Though compact in size, this "research-based book"

also gives a brief write-up on the background of each one of the brilliant minds who have been mentioned in this publication. Our own philosopher poet Soso Tham had written in one of his poems, "Jingstadgi nag sawdong pyrthei, jingshai ka Ri ngim tip eiei" (knowledge we seek around the world, wisdom of our own we know nothing at all) is very apt when relating to this book because the Hynniewtreps people are also known to be "ka bala rim bha (Ancient) ka ba stad (Intelligent) bad ka ba jylliew (Deep)". The book's translation into many languages is an acknowledgement that this book is a must read for people with 'an inquisitive mind' and those who want to enrich their world view. Thank you once again Salil Grewal for a treasure of a book that allows me to make a critical study into the contributions of ancient India to the world vis-a-vis the India that we live in today and India tomorrow will not disappoint the world nor its own citizens. Yours etc., Michael N.Syiem, Via email

Call for genuine change & development in Meghalaya

Editor, The election results in the Shillong constituency mark a significant and much-needed shift in our state's political landscape. The active participation of the youth in the voting process has been particularly commendable, demonstrating a robust exercise of democratic rights and a collective desire for real change. This should serve as a wake-up call to all political parties: if you do not prioritize the development and welfare of the people, you will face similar consequences again. The electorate has clearly voiced their demands, which include improvements in education, employment generation, traffic management, and other pressing issues that affect the daily lives of ordinary citizens. It is imperative for the parties to heed this message and begin working earnestly towards these goals. The mandate given to the winning parties in Shillong and Tura is not a mere victory; it is a call to

action requiring a top-notch performance dedicated to the people's needs. A corruption-free administration is crucial for the progress of our state. The new leadership must ensure transparency and integrity in their governance. The voters have shown that they will no longer tolerate complacency or malfeasance. Now, it is up to the newly elected representatives to deliver on their promises and work for the welfare of all citizens, regardless of caste or creed. To the other political parties: this is your moment to reflect and act. Start working now towards tangible improvements in the lives of your constituents, or the upcoming MDC elections might bring an even bigger shock. The people of our state are no longer passive observers; they are active participants in their future. Let us remain vigilant and hopeful, and see what positive changes this new wave of leadership will bring to our beloved state. Yours etc., R Sarki Shillong

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

"There are dark shadows on the earth, but its lights are stronger in the contrast."

—Charles Dickens

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 295 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JUNE 6, 2024

VPP arrives; NPP annihilated

AFTER 44 years a regional party - the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) has been able to breach the citadel of the national parties to enter the august portals of the Lok Sabha through the phenomenal victory of its candidate Dr Ricky A J Syngkon who has surpassed all other MPs in terms of the winning margin at 3,71,910. The last person to have been elected from the All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC) in 1980 was Bajubon Kharlukhi. Before that Hopingstone Lyngdoh of the Hill State Peoples' Democratic Party (HSPDP) was elected in 1977. It was evident that there was anger brewing among the masses owing to gross deprivation of their basic necessities which they attribute to poor governance and corruption. The voters have responded by giving a decisive victory to the VPP candidate primarily because the party has vowed to tackle corruption and provide clean governance. The NPP is identified with the purported 'high level' who call the shots in the government and who are seen to be flaunting their wealth in a state that is the third poorest in the country and where 37% of people are stated to be living below poverty line (NFHS-5). There is a point beyond which people will not tolerate political apathy and high-handedness or indeed the insensitive and conceited assertions of Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong at different platforms. Now it is for the VPP to prove itself as a pro-people party and give voice to their concerns. The word 'people' is also in the nomenclature of the NPP. But in the real world, no political party really consults people in policy-making. Will the VPP lead the way in this democratic process?

Also the VPP has to now decide who to align with at the national level since a regional party with a single MP would have to close ranks and align with the parties that are closest to its ideology. For now the choice is the NDA or the INDI Alliance. The VPP has not publicly spelt out its options. The annihilation of the NPP which is leading the coalition government in Meghalaya is now complete. Both its candidates were routed with the Shillong candidate faring a poor third. The Congress party was able to rejuvenate itself and win the Tura seat. Gauging from the spontaneous support that Saleng Sangma was able to garner it was evident that the people of Garo Hills were with him. In both seats the NPP's alliance with the BJP - a party that is overtly communal, anti-minority and oppressive to the extreme in its assault on personal freedoms and its propensity to quash voices of dissent in its 10-year rule.

It would be in the best interests of Meghalaya if the VPP and Congress were to speak in unison and draw the attention of the central government to the development lacunae in the state amongst other concerns. People have voted for a change and they yearn to see that change in action!

2024 Polls outcome may lead to dilution of Modi's authoritarianism

Coalition govt a good signal for our vibrant democracy

By Girish Linganna

The perception of superiority surrounding Narendra Modi has unexpectedly collapsed. The election outcomes on Tuesday were disheartening for Modi, who has often referred to himself as "Sent with a purpose" and set an ambitious slogan of 'Abki baar, 400 paar' (This time, above 400). However, this slogan may have had unintended consequences as the prospect of such a massive majority sparked apprehensions among the underprivileged about potential changes to the Constitution.

At age 73, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have achieved remarkable success compared to other political parties. It seems they are on track to secure a third consecutive term for Modi as Prime Minister. Modi, himself, considers this accomplishment as a monumental milestone in India's history. Nevertheless, despite the possibility of his party losing some seats in Parliament, they may have to work together with smaller parties within their coalition to form a government.

Modi, who could become only the second Indian PM to secure a third consecutive term, hailed it as a historic milestone in India's history. Instead of a big win, the BJP lost many seats and has fallen short of a simple majority. It is leading by a small margin in the 543-seat Parliament, but does not have the required 272 seats on its own. However, its coalition partners have picked up extra seats. The election results are a setback for Modi, who has always won majorities in previous elections as Gujarat's chief minister and India's prime minister and has been a dominant figure in Indian politics for the past 10 years.

This outcome also represents an unexpected comeback for the Opposition Congress-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDI Alliance), going against earlier predictions of its decline and differing significantly from both exit polls and pre-election surveys.

When the results became clear, the stock markets in the country experienced a sharp fall. Opposition parties who had joined forces to "protect the nation's democracy," celebrated the outcome. Although Modi strengthened his grip on power in India, he discovered his political influence had its limits. He

effectively made the election all about himself, even though it is typically fought on a constituency basis.

In a statement released on X, Modi expressed his optimism and announced that his coalition had secured a third term. He described this achievement as a remarkable milestone in the history of India.

A lenient interpretation of the outcome for Modi would suggest that his party's victory at the local level was possible only because of his personal efforts, despite its unpopularity. Alternatively, it could indicate that his carefully nurtured image has reached its peak and he can no longer evade the public's dissatisfaction that eventually catches up with most politicians.

It is unclear how Modi will respond to the situation. He may intensify his efforts to suppress any opposition to his authority, or he may be humbled by the voters' decision and the necessity to collaborate with coalition partners who do not hold the same Hindu-nationalist beliefs as he does.

The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the Janata Dal (United) will, indeed, be kingmakers in the formation of the new government. With 16 seats in Andhra Pradesh and 12 seats in Bihar, respectively, these parties hold considerable influence in determining the formation of the next government. Their commitment to secularism is particularly important, as it raises hopes among those who oppose Prime Minister Modi's efforts to prioritize Hinduism in India's governance.

Naidu, a technocrat who served as Andhra Pradesh's chief minister three times and played a crucial role in promoting India's technological capabilities, made a comeback after being incarcerated for several weeks on corruption allegations last year. Additionally, his party is leading in the state elections of Andhra Pradesh, indicating that the 74-year-old Naidu is likely to secure another term as the state's chief minister.

The second BJP partner, Janata Dal (United), from Bihar, is led by Nitish Kumar, who has a reputation for frequently changing his political affiliations. Despite serving as Bihar's chief min-

ister nine times, his coalitions have often failed, resulting in the termination of his terms. However, Kumar has consistently bounced back by forming new alliances.

The biggest blow for PM Modi's party came from Uttar Pradesh. With 80 parliamentary seats, UP wields significant influence in national politics and is often seen as the key to Delhi, the seat of the central government. It is noteworthy that both Modi and the Congress's Rahul Gandhi hold seats in this state.

The defeat in the Faizabad constituency highlighted how some of the major initiatives of the prime minister had failed to resonate with the voters. The Faizabad constituency is significant as it is the site of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. The temple's grand inauguration, planned just before the election campaign, was expected not only to consolidate Modi's Hindu supporters, but also attract new followers.

Some BJP workers noted that the party's emphasis on the Ram Temple may have alienated many Hindus from the lower castes. The Opposition accused PM Modi of favouring upper caste interests, which they argued limited opportunities for disadvantaged Hindus to overcome long-standing oppression. This perspective was highlighted in a BBC report.

To counter potential losses in his northern stronghold, or the Hindi heartland, Modi aimed high for this election. He wanted to make inroads in the more prosperous southern regions of the country. He made some progress in Kerala. However, overall in the South, he found it challenging to surpass the 29 seats his party had secured out of 129 in the previous election.

One of the biggest setbacks for the BJP in southern India was that it seemed to have failed once again to win any of the 39 seats in Tamil Nadu. Modi had campaigned vigorously in Tamil Nadu, even spending two days meditating in a coastal town as the election drew to a close. India has a history of chaotic coalition governments, although some in the early-1990s and 2000s were instrumental in bringing about economic reforms. If the BJP forms the government, it will have to rely on its allies and will

need to adopt a more collaborative and consultative approach. This reliance makes the government vulnerable to collapse if the allies feel ignored. The party, once seen as all-powerful, now depends on its allies, unlike in 2014 and 2019.

The election outcomes will revitalize the Congress-led Opposition, which has often faced criticism. The INDI Alliance remained intact despite facing turbulence in February when one of its key leaders, Nitish Kumar, withdrew from the alliance before later rejoining the BJP.

Under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi, the Opposition conducted a vibrant campaign and made significant progress, despite limited resources and biased media coverage. The future appears promising for the Opposition as the BJP currently holds around one-third of India's 4,000+ state Assembly seats and they have previously been defeated by regional parties. In the next 14 months, five states are scheduled to hold elections, all of which could witness intense competition.

The BJP may confront significant challenges in Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana this year, as they face tough competition in these regions. The forthcoming elections in Delhi could also present difficulties, while Bihar's regional dynamics in October add another hurdle to overcome.

India requires significant efforts and reconciliation moving forward. The economy is experiencing growth, primarily driven by government expenditure. However, inequality is also increasing. To sustain this progress, there is a need for higher private investment and increased consumer spending. It is crucial for the lower-income and middle-class populations to have more disposable income to stimulate economic activity.

Modi has faced backlash for marginalizing Muslims, who have experienced a disproportionate amount of violence. His government has been accused of suppressing dissent, resulting in prominent Opposition leaders being imprisoned under what they claim are fabricated charges. However, third terms in office have often presented challenges for many leaders, as unexpected and unpredictable events can veer governments off their intended course and disrupt their plans. (IPA Service)

Myth of Modi magic stands beaten

By Jagdish Rattanani

It is now evident that the people of India have rejected the Modi-ised version of the BJP. The BJP is well short of a majority in the incoming Lok Sabha on its own steam and has, to that extent been contained. Even if the BJP-led NDA forms the government at the Centre, the narrative that is being pushed as this piece is being written, it opens the possibility of a heavily-chastened BJP being forced to bow to the dictates of coalition politics. The new partners that the BJP will have no choice but to listen to, particularly the Telugu Desam Party of Chandrababu Naidu and the Janata Dal (United) of Nitish Kumar, have acquired new strength and have already demanded key portfolios, according to reports. This in itself puts brakes on a runaway BJP playing its own haughty tunes with a self-righteousness that many Indians have come to despise.

Under these circumstances, we can conclude that the days of a Modi-led, command-and-control obsessed BJP riding roughshod over sentiments across the political spectrum may be over. No longer can this be the party of one path, one election, one man, one truth. The people of India, particularly voters across Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Maharashtra, have ensured that the BJP learns some key lessons about the rainbow of colours that go into the making of white light.

This is the least that 2024 elections bring, with the possibility of many other twists and turns that are in the news, including important questions of the ability of Modi to continue at the helm even if the government is led by the BJP. The hollowed-out party, by now unused to raising any challenges or asking any questions of its leadership, will take some time to absorb the results and will likely look to the RSS for cues to raising an internal revolt, an event not as unlikely as it looked just a day ago.

Further, the reported threats under which some of the poll alliances have been signed by the Modi-led party, an example being the ugly manner in which Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena and Sharad Pawar's NCP were broken in Maharashtra, leaves open the possibility of breakup factions returning to their base parties and the NDA itself shrinking. There are some reports, unconfirmed yet, that legislators and the newly elected candidates from the Shinde faction of the Shiv Sena, allied with the BJP, are in touch with the original Shiv Sena of Uddhav Thackeray, who has stood against the BJP and is with the INDI alliance.

It is equally likely that Narendra Modi will attempt to do what he is best at - threatened by the election results, he will look to seize more control and double up on opposition-bashing along with the politics of vendetta that has been the hallmark of the party for the last several years. This brook-no-opposition tendency can bring new twists to the post poll scenario. The first speech of Modi at the BJP headquarters late Tuesday evening indicated that he is not particularly humbled by the result and he used the word "Modi ki guarantee" again, though just once, and not the way the term has been used during the campaign. Time will tell if this is a put-on bravado or an indication of more Modi-style politics to come, and if it comes after a backroom endorsement from the RSS or is indeed a ploy to checkmate opposition building against him internally. What was not to be missed, however, was the point made by Modi that this will be a "NDA sarkar" - a self-declared and a telling change from everything Modi that the party and its politics have been reduced to thus far.

From the election promises that were called "Modi ki guarantee", to a series of

schemes, projects, institutions and even a cricket stadium, Modi will go down as the person who took over a party and put it in service of and for one man, consumed by a self-love on the one hand and a bitterness that saw him sink the political discourse to a new low on the other hand. The capture of a party that once claimed a breadth of leadership, the promotion of those who serenaded Modi and the competitive communalism that was used to burnish credentials and as a shortcut to limelight and power, are all a part of the story that built the myth of the so-called Modi magic. Since it was all tied to Modi and his trusted number two, Home Minister Amit Shah, the blame of all that has gone wrong at the hustings will also rest on the shoulders of the two who together are derisively referred to as the '1.5 leadership' of the BJP.

It is not out of place to mention that a large part of the fall of the BJP from the self-declared lofty targets is directly linked to the arrangement of the '1.5 leadership'. Maharashtra stands out as an example. Modi called Sharad Pawar the "bhatkoti" (a directionless soul) after driving a wedge in his family; he called Uddhav Thackeray, the son of Bal Thackeray a "nakli heir", or a fake, injecting new level of venom into a political divide that he created. Yet, none of this need have been if the Modi-Shah combine had allowed Thackeray to continue as Chief Minister for another term after the last Assembly elections in Maharashtra.

By refusing to give him the post, they forced Thackeray to befriend the Congress-NCP, and after he did that to form the government in the State, the BJP got its agencies after Sena leaders. They eventually split the Sena to form a government with breakaways - always looking for the short-term prize and an ego-boost at the cost of long-term growth and grass roots political work with the decency and mutual respect that might be expected of a senior political partner.

This approach has been in play at other levels with other partners, a result of which is that the leadership is not trusted, is seen as playing dirty tricks and is seen as using partners only to gobble them up. It is known that Chandrababu Naidu does not really harbour good sentiments for the BJP leadership, particularly Modi. True, he was in an alliance with the BJP in these elections but most of the alliances with the BJP are rooted in political compulsions and to escape the threat of harassment by Modi's investigative agencies. The controversy forcibly kicked-up in Odisha against Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on his health was equally negative, and left a bad taste. Even though the BJP has won Odisha, the methods that have likely succeeded here are the methods that have lost it power elsewhere and ruined the name of the party and led to it being seen as narrow, vicious and full of vitriol.

Finally, the results show that money power is not enough to win hands down. There is no doubt that the Modi sarkar had full control of the machinery, media and poured in unmatched money, its ill-gotten wealth from the later declared illegal electoral bonds and from other sources. Despite all this, it failed. In that, it is a reminder of the wisdom of V P Singh who once had said: "In India, you can lose an election for want of money, but you cannot win just because you have money."

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Regional politics wave on ground zero

The high voter turnout in the Shillong seat for the Parliamentary elections (73.76 %) was the writing on the wall for what was to come. While it became clear on April 19 that the Voice of the People Party (VPP) was going to win a landslide victory, what was not clear was how big the landslide was going to be. What was also not clear was how much incursion was the new party going to make into the vote banks of NPP and Congress in Jaintia Hills. But the complete washout in all of Jaintia Hills, in almost all of Khasi Hills barring two Assembly Constituencies, and in almost all of Ri Bhoi barring two Assembly constituencies, means that the coming KHADC and JHADC elections are a foregone conclusion. It also means that VPP is now the kingmaker, in the literal sense as it will produce the next administrators over the Himas and Elakas.

In actuality, the huge victory of the Congress may also mean that the GHADC elections too are a foregone conclusion.

Coming to the national scene, while the NDA has been elected to a third term, it is clear that it is running on its last legs, but it is also clear that the Congress Party will not be able to reclaim its former prestige in national politics. The next five years may see an unprecedented wave of regional politics throughout the country, as the people get wary of BJP, and will not look to the Congress Party either.

Perhaps, the presence of VPP in the national politics with absolute backing of the people, along with other regional parties, may at some point trigger a bigger wave of regional politics as the only obvious solution to the current impasse of having to choose between the BJP and the Congress. Perhaps, both the BJP and the Congress will cease to be the "bus drivers" by 2029.

Yours etc.,
Kitor H. Blah,
Shillong

Is populism good or bad?

Editor,
According to the news, "VPP rides on populist politics" (ST June 5, 2024), populism is a political movement that aims to appeal to the people by positioning its

leaders as representatives of their concerns, which they believe are being ignored by an elite establishment. Populism emphasizes the struggle between the morally virtuous people and a corrupt, self-serving group of elites. Populists define the people based on socio-economic class, ethnicity or nationality, while viewing the elite as a broad establishment that prioritizes its own interests over those of the people. Populist movements often have charismatic figures who present themselves as, "the voice of the people." For instance, former US President Donald Trump positioned himself as a populist leader, claiming that a small group in Washington DC had benefited from the government while the people suffered.

Populism can be found across the political spectrum, including both conservative and liberal variants. It transcends typical left-right divisions and is characterised by anti-establishment sentiment. While populism can empower marginalized groups, it is sometimes criticized for encouraging demagoguery or authoritarianism. Economists associate it with extensive public spending programs financed by foreign loans, which can lead to hyperinflation and subsequent belt-tightening measures. Popu-

lism represents a complex interplay between people and the elite, often fuelled by discontent with established political structures. Here are a few examples of recent populist leaders in the world. Donald Trump, the former American President is considered a classic populist. His political style involves railing against various elites, such as media or courts, while positioning himself as standing up for ordinary people. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, the now-deceased former President, was a populist leader who came from a poor background. He aimed to overturn the power of the wealthy elites in Caracas and give it to the poor. However, Venezuela's subsequent autocratic dictatorship under his successor, Nicolas Maduro, highlights the potential dangers of populism. Another populist leader in recent times is Juan Peron of Argentina who focused on eliminating poverty from the country. His ideas continue to influence the Peronist movement, which blends nationalism with support for the working class.

Populism has a long history and continues to be relevant today. Originally, it was a progressive movement rooted in the economic and political realities of its time. However, its meaning

and impact have evolved over the years. Populism often centres around issues of inequality, labour precarity, and power imbalances in capitalist societies. While it is sometimes associated with radical right-wing ideologies, it is essential to recognise that populism can manifest across political spectrum. Yes, populism persists and shapes contemporary politics. While populism can resonate with many people by addressing their concerns and promising change, it also has potential downsides. Populist leaders often oversimplify complex problems, offering straightforward solutions that may not fully address underlying issues. Populism tends to create an 'us vs. them' mentality, pitting the 'common people' against elites and minorities. This can lead to polarization and hinder constructive dialogue. Some populist leaders exhibit authoritarian tendencies, undermining democratic institutions and checks and balances. Populist policies such as protectionism or excessive welfare spending, can have unintended economic consequences, affecting stability and growth. Populism often prioritizes short-term gains over long-term sustainability, potentially neglecting crucial investments or reforms.

Some historical instances

of populism

Populism has a rich history and some notable ones are that the United States Populist Movement was active during the late 1800s, championing the interests of ordinary citizens. The Populist Party, formed in 1892, advocated for progressive taxation and direct democracy through popular initiatives and referendums. In the mid-20th century, populism became associated with leaders like Juan Peron in Argentina, Getulio Vargas in Brazil and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. They combine charismatic appeal with policies aimed at empowering the common people. In the early 21st century, populist authoritarian regimes emerged in countries like Turkey, Poland and Hungary. These leaders often consolidate power by claiming to embody the will of the people. We have to note that not all forms of populism are the same, and their impact varies depending on context and leadership.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
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.

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

— Sam Levenson

The Shillong Times

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Stability a casualty

THE tamed BJP-led NDA is set to form the government for the third consecutive term by virtue of the upper hand it retained in the 2024 General Elections. That strength will be solidified albeit for now by the backing it was offered by the JDU of Bihar's Nitish Kumar and the Telugu Desam of AP's Chandrababu Naidu, which returned to the NDA after seasons of alienation. The BJP and its alliance partners have reposed faith in Prime Minister Narendra Modi and sought his continued leadership to run the next government. The script so far is fine. But, there is little doubt that the political stability that Prime Minister Modi provided the nation in the past 10 years will now have to face the litmus test. Both Kumar and Chandrababu are undependable allies and had personally targeted Modi in the past. They can be depended on to keep him on his toes if the new government is headed by Modi himself. Modi will be touching 74 in September and he's one year away from the 75-rule he imposed on other BJP leaders vis-a-vis the handling of public office. While he can continue to be in the driving seat for a little over a year before he crosses this line, there already are several if's and but's.

We were so far exposed to a 'strong' Modi. Yet, the 10 years he led the nation saw modest achievements. He stated a day ago that the need now is to fight corruption and introduce more reforms; matters he allowed to drag on despite the old promises on these. With the likes of Chandrababu Naidu, or Sharad Pawar giving him security cover now, cleaning the Augean Stables can only be a wishful thinking. An ambitious Nitish Kumar or a scheming Naidu would, in future, be too willing to ditch the NDA if they are promised the PM post in a new realignment of forces. Politics is the art of the possible; more so for unscrupulous leaders. India is sure to wade into a period of instability as the people have given an unclear verdict.

The Congress party with close to 100 seats in Parliament regained its strength to respectable levels. Whether this will reflect in the way that those like Rahul Gandhi conduct themselves is worth a wait and watch. The end of the season of Modi Prabhav is likely to spell more trouble for the BJP. Internal dissension can be anticipated and the organisational strengths of the BJP are questionable. It relied on Modi for votes. That scenario has changed at least for now. Worse, the main battleground state of Uttar Pradesh has changed its colour and the SP-Congress alliance has outwitted the BJP there. This cannot be a time of celebration for India as the future appears ominous.

Analysing the Meghalaya Lok Sabha results

By Patricia Mukhim

For the first time perhaps, the results of the MP elections in Meghalaya did not take us by surprise. But before we ourselves could dissect the win and loss, the CM of the neighbouring State of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma has given his convoluted verdict - that the results in Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland which defied the saffron flag were all due to the Christian Missionaries and their intrusion into the politics of these three states. Since he is the leader of the North East Development Agency (NEDA) where development is happening in his home state only, he would have to answer to his bosses on why the BJP or its allies could not win all 25 seats from the North Eastern states. This time all that the BJP and its allies could get are 11 seats from Assam, 2 from Arunachal Pradesh, 2 from Tripura and 1 ally from Sikkim making it a total of 16 out of 25 MPs from the North Eastern states. The rest 9 seats went to regional parties and the Congress.

Coming to the Meghalaya results, the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) as far as political interpretation goes has been following a policy of populism which appeals to peoples' emotions and their most cherished values of self-esteem which they feel has been lost owing to the poor governance by a political elite which has deprived them of their basic needs. Stark poverty has pushed parents to pull their kids out of school and make them work. Forget about providing them a nourishing diet because the prices of essential commodities have shot through the roof. Even with free rice (Modi rice) people still need to buy meat, vegetables, dal, tea leaves, all of which are unaffordable for an average lower middle income family that inhabit our villages - villages that have no roads or very bad roads where power is not assured and water supply is an unfulfilled promise. The Jal Jeevan Mission actually needs urgent auditing because while pipes are fitted everywhere all the flows through the pipes are hot air!

It is to such a destitute population that the VPP's appeal resonated the most. What politicians don't learn or learn too late is that the roots of political dysfunction lie deep in society. Politics in Meghalaya has become a

game of the "high level" with people seen as an entity that can be made to vote by offering them some crumbs. What is Rs 2000 or even 5000 in today's inflationary trends. A gas cylinder itself costs close to Rs 1000. This is the socio-economic context in which large swathes of Meghalaya's population live in and politics is embedded in this social context. The poorer people are the more alienated they feel and the more do they see voting as an exercise that enables one person to get rich overnight. That person contesting is not even one of them. He lives elsewhere far from the daily ground that pinches them. He is only a visitor to the constituency. This has been the plight of people in the villages I visit every now and again. During the campaign period everyone said, "Lah u prah pei ba peit ia ii ba jot ba pei" (We prefer the VPP with the winnow symbol because they reach out to us honestly and feel our penury). This stance echoed far and wide. Those that can read the signs should understand that the statistic that Meghalaya is the third poorest state in the country is as real as it can get. But who cares about statistics in Meghalaya? This is what the VPP has tapped on.

Coming to the NPP, it is evident that the Party was over-confident about translating all the MLA constituencies into votes for the MP candidate. That would have happened to an extent but the last straw on the camel's back was broken when an over-confident Conrad Sangma decided to be an ally of the BJP and ride on the popularity of Narendra Modi. That bravado is a nightmare that will keep him awake in a long time. Conrad Sangma in his second term has become over-confident as much as Prime Minister Modi has. Actually, a successful CM and in this case the President of the NPP, has to make decisions while radiating hesitancy; staying open-minded in the face of new evidence and not fall into the trap that afflicts those with excessive self-confidence because politics is too slippery a game even for the veterans.

In the Garo Hills, the NPP's alliance with the BJP was what turned the tide in favour of the Congress.

What is an example that merits to be emulated is that people were spontaneous in their support of Congress candidate Saleng Sangma. They donated generously to the expenses. Perhaps they were disillusioned by an MP who was distant and not with the people at their hour of need. This is also a lesson to future politicians not to take peoples' affection and their loyalty for granted. It is unfortunate that the Congress candidate in Shillong could not generate as much following as Saleng Sangma. The campaign was staid and unimaginative. Perhaps if a younger candidate like Manuel Badwar had contested it would have been a different fight.

As far as the UDP is concerned, it remains a party that hunts with the hare and hunts with the hounds. It is a regional party only during elections and then slips back into a comfort zone of aligning with national parties. That's its raison d'être for as long as one can remember. But the UDP is smugly arrogant and believes the VPP will have a short-lived love affair with the people that elected it to the Lok Sabha because the populism with which it rode to victory will be a tough act to follow. They are not too far off the mark in this! The VPP has not been in the seat of power yet and can only hope to be in the driving seat in 2028. But even then, without any foothold in Garo Hills it will be difficult for any party to even dream of piloting the state. The VPP has already alienated the Garos by its demand for a revision of the Reservation Policy. How the Party deals with his enigma is for them to figure out. Its not the business of political spectators to even contemplate on that.

A congenital disorder afflicting political leaders is arrogance. Meghalaya is a tiny state. Its politicians need to converge on some of the thorny issues that afflict this state. Political ideologies are meaningless if they turn people into arch enemies. A political ideology is something that is crafted after consulting with the hoi-polloi. It is not drafted by intellectuals/academics with no idea of the ground realities. But from years of observing state politics one discerns a strange political arrogance that prevents politicians from

cutting across party lines to debate as a group and (not as rivals wanting to score brownie points) on issues that defy solution in Meghalaya. Psychologists aver that arrogance is a sign of insecurity and low self-esteem, and it can damage relationships and reputation. Political parties should learn to listen to one another instead of talking over each other. Every political party has something to contribute towards the thinking process so that all the thinking is not left to the bureaucracy. And in Meghalaya we have a bureaucracy that has outsourced that thinking to a plethora of consultants. An audit of how much is paid to those consultants and what are the outputs and outcomes would reveal that there has been no discernible impact on the ground.

Some politicians have said that the VPP won on emotive issues and a populist agenda - which it may or may not be able to fulfil. For large sections of voters, the voting this time was an expression of frustration against the ruling party and its apathy towards their agony. The VPP stepped into this vacuum of a huge trust deficit and convinced people that it represents their concerns which has hitherto been ignored by a government run by a class of affluent elites. Social media has added spice and fired people's imaginations as to what 'people' power which is what the VPP has turned itself into, can actually do if given the mandate.

There is enough literature to tell us that populism is not sustainable in the long run because converting political promises into ground-breaking action is a tall order in a state with limited resources and huge developmental gaps. Most parties that ride on the wave of populism soon become mainstream and then follow the conventional route. Of course, this conclusion rests on the understanding of populism being purely a short-term challenger actor and an episodic phenomenon. However, the VPP will contest this and say it will remain on the straight and narrow. Well for the sake of the millions that have voted for this Party of the "People" we hope that their hopes are not dashed to the ground. Long live Democracy!

Chandrababu Naidu in driver's seat in national politics after 2024 polls Modi 3.0 Govt's fate depends largely on his future moves

By Sushil Kutty

Chandrababu Naidu is no 'Comeback Kid,' not at his age. The only 'kid' in today's Andhra Pradesh is Jana Sena founder Pawan Kalyan, the Telugu actor who played a stellar role in bringing together the Telugu Desam Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party. If any title fits Chandrababu Naidu, it is that of 'Mr. Negotiator.' The Jena Sena is part of the NDA but, if there is a weak link, it is Naidu's Telugu Desam Party along with Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal-U.

Naidu and Nitish are unpredictable and prone to lapse into amnesia. The two would be a clear and ever present threat to Prime Minister Narendra Modi if they join his coalition. Fact is, the duo would be a clear and present danger to even an NDI-Alliance government if the alliance forms a government with their support. The gospel is Chandrababu Naidu's rebounds are as surgical as Nitish Kumar's turmurounds.

Naidu and Nitish also share a history of doing their utmost to bring down Modi 1.0 and the Modi 2.0 governments. Their opposition to the Modi style of governance lasted till as recently as when the NDI-Alliance was born earlier this year. If Nitish Kumar was active in the NDI-Alliance, Naidu couldn't decide whether to join Modi. At the end of the day, he chose to align with Modi.

Today, Chandrababu Naidu controls 16 Lok Sabha MPs and Nitish Kumar has 12. What is in CBN's mind

Supremo spent the entire period of 2014-2019 gunning for Modi when Naidu was Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister.

The NDI-Alliance parties know the Modi-Naidu history like the back of their hands and the NDI-Alliance can't stop talking of Naidu these days, after Modi's BJP lost majority in the Lok Sabha. How Chandrababu Naidu stood up to Modi's dictatorial style of governance is being told and retold on TV and radio and at public podiums all over India. NDI-Alliance leaders haven't a chance in hell to form a government, but that isn't stopping them from wooing Chandrababu Naidu whose equation with DMK Chief MK Stalin and Shiv Sena UBT head Uddhav Thackeray are excellent.

In fact, Stalin and Naidu met at the 'airport' on June 5 and now Naidu has postponed the inauguration of the next TDP government in Andhra Pradesh by several days. Surely, the BJP will be worried not only because it will be part of the next Andhra Pradesh government led by Naidu but also because TDP has promised to be part of the NDA government led by Modi at the Centre. Naidu is capable of upsetting the Modi applecart even before Narendra Modi takes a bite from the apple.

Trouble is, considering Chandrababu Naidu's history, it doesn't need too much of an imagination to visualize Naidu doing a flip-flop. If Nitish Kumar is 'Paltu Ram', Naidu is a



is as hard to gauge as it is to imagine what Nitish Kumar could do overnight? Prime Minister Narendra Modi would age 100 years in six months if Nitish and Naidu are part of Modi 3.0. The uncertainty will keep Modi on tenterhooks. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will have to straightaway bestow special category status on Andhra Pradesh and Bihar.

Already, some of the demands put forward by the TDP are giving Modi reason for pause. This includes choice of ministerial portfolios and first right on the 'NDA convenor post'. Will Narendra Modi be able to say 'No' to Chandrababu Naidu?

And why should Chandrababu Naidu take 'No' for an answer, when a call for 'Yes' is the bargaining chip? Prime Minister Narendra Modi will have the option to silence and mollify Naidu by giving Andhra Pradesh special category status with a special financial package to pull the state out of the economic distress it has found itself in ever since the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh before 2014. According to the TDP, the state inherited 59 percent of the population, debt, and liabilities and only 47 percent of its revenues.

Today, Naidu will be Chief Minister of an agrarian state. Naidu will not settle for peanuts. He had asked for special category status from Modi 1.0. In March 2018, Naidu pulled out two TDP ministers from the Modi government on the issue - P Ashok Gajapati Raju (Civil Aviation) and Y Satyanarayana Chowdhury (MoS, Science and Technology and Earth Sciences).

Then, Modi didn't need TDP support. Today, he does require the TDP but reports say the third-time Prime Minister-to-be is fighting pressure for cabinet berths in the Modi 3.0 government from Naidu and the TDP demand for the Speaker's post. BJP sources say "MoS and Deputy Speaker's post" are on the table, take them or leave them. Former Union Home Minister Amit Shah is proving to be as tenacious a negotiator as Chandrababu used to be in the mid-1990s. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Role of NDA allies significant

Editor

The mandate in the recently concluded general elections has brought in a lot of questions, introspections and pushes political parties to think of better strategies ahead of 2024. The election has been a big lesson for the BJP with the party squandering 31 seats in the Lok Sabha and is down to 32 to be the party with the single largest majority in the NDA alliance. This has allowed the allies who have agreed to support the BJP on certain conditions to extract their pound of flesh. The portfolios that the major allies will be demanding from Mr. Narendra Modi will be a thing to wait and watch. It will put to the test the tactical skills of the PM designate. The way the results have turned out show re-emphasizes that fact that the people of India who have seen the previous two tenures of the BJP-led NDA government being driven by a Modi-fied image of bulldozing issues and going against people sentiments. This has put the brakes on his future ambitions such as changing the Constitution, pushing the UCC and CAA amongst others. For the BJP to deal with experienced

politicians like Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar will be a different ball game altogether considering the leverage that they currently have over others. They are a group that will tread cautiously on issue that alienate people. They have already made their demands clear to PM Modi. The coming days will be interesting to watch the role of the two key 'king makers'.

Yours etc.
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Via email

Media and ECI failed in their duties

Editor,

It is said that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. This can be said about the never-say-die attitude of nearly all the opposition parties at the national level and especially about Rahul Gandhi and his strenuous Bharat Jodo Yatra and Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. The opposition parties did their duty of raising the people's grievances against rising inequality, unemployment, and prices in the Parliament and the streets. They did it in spite of having a level playing field. They faced unprecedented financial inequality among political parties and allegedly "preferential" treatment from

investigative agencies. Moreover, they got little support from the media. Just like the opposition parties, it is the duty of the media to ask the government questions of the people. Media is a bridge between the ruling (and opposition) parties and the people. But a large section of the fourth estate preferred the role of cheerleading the ruling batting side.

Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra and Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra successfully created a direct bridge to connect with the people. Being on the streets for months gave him an opportunity to directly listen to the people. This is one of the reasons why the Congress manifesto for the 2024 Lok Sabha election becomes more pro-common people, pro-women, and pro-Dalits than their previous manifestos.

The Congress party has been the main opposition party of India since 2014. Therefore, a call for a Congress-mukt Bharat sounds like a call for an opposition-mukt Bharat. It is a despot call to end democracy in India because democracy can not function without opposition parties!

A political leader instructed the audience in some recent election campaigns not just to vote for his political party but to punish the opposition parties by pressing the EVM button as hard as possible. This is in sync

with the call. The guarantee of 400 plus seats again bears not only pride but also an aspiration for an opposition free football match where a team can score as many goals as it wants.

The mandate of voters in the election is for democracy and against using religion and fault lines between communities as a political tool. The fault lines between communities have been used in the recent election campaigns as a red herring and to polarise the voters.

Political leaders holding the most responsible constitutional posts are not supposed to play this game. However, the theory of demand and supply points a finger towards the people. In order to answer the criticism for showing sadistic violence in the movies, the movie makers always say that they are doing it because audiences want to see violence to get entertained.

An anchor of a TV debate also throws the ball to the people's court when he is confronted with uncomfortable questions regarding on-screen debate becoming a platform for abuse and verbal violence.

It is a vicious circle. A cigarette company, for example, gives advertisements associating cigarette smoking with fashion and freedom to increase the demand and starts producing more cigarettes if there is a rise in

demand. But the question is how to break the circle.

The statutory warning against cigarette smoking effected a cut in the demand. In the same way, the censor board can check the portrayal of unnerving violence in films. Similarly, it is the responsibility of the Election Commission of India to take prompt action against the use of religion and fault lines in an election campaign. It is highly unfortunate that the Election Commission preferred to look the other way on many occasions.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

The new Arthashastra in NE India

Editor,

Recently the 7th edition of the Indo-French military exercise dubbed 'Shakti' was held at the Joint Warfare Centre in Umroi showcasing the best brains and brawns in crafting military strategy and tactics. The major takeaway from such engagements is working towards future threats in an uncertain environment. Units from the Rajputana Rifles to the French Foreign Legion showed how far the relationship has stretched. After the declaration of the election

results, Northeast India and its security paradigm should be taken seriously by the new government as proxy elements alongside our 5,500 km (approx) vulnerable borders are watching us more closely than ever.

Such joint endeavours with foreign forces enables security forces to combat unconventional warfare in cyberspace, narco-terrorism, financial terrorism and EMP technology which could render instability to the economic architecture while pointing to high unemployment rate statistics amongst youths who might fall into the bear trap.

The pulse of the people and its various demands is a balanced concept while taking every stakeholder on board and being accountable but that depends on wise leadership. Kris Paronto's book 'The Ronger Way' outlines the principles of how leaders deal with their problems, accepting responsibility thereby opening a window of opportunity towards better learning and ideas.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gatphoh,
Shillong-10

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"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Meddlesome Assam CM

IT is out of character for the Chief Minister of a state to interfere in the voting pattern of people in another state. Chief Ministers usually maintain a certain decorum which is that of mutual respect towards one another since all of them enjoy equal status irrespective of the size of the state or population. But the Assam Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma continues to revel in the idea that it is his prerogative to question the voting pattern of people in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram and to attribute it to the influence of a 'certain religion.' The above four states bucked the trend. In Manipur, a BJP-ruled state, the BJP could not return even one MP out of two. Both seats went to the Congress. Although the Assam CM did not spell out the name of the religion it is obvious that he was hinting at Christian missionaries preaching against the BJP and influencing people to vote against it. This allegation assumes that the hill tribals are easily swayed by religion and do not have a mind of their own in terms of who they choose to vote for.

In Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma has launched a movement against educational institutions run by Christian missionaries and instructed them to remove the statue of Christ put up in the school premises. This even while Biswa Sarma has himself been revilingly spreading the Hindutva agenda in his home state and during his campaigns elsewhere in the country. He reviled at Muslims as being illegal migrants out to dispossess the Hindus in his state of Assam. In terms of the coarse language he uses to demonise Muslims, Biswa Sarma is equal only to his boss - Narendra Modi. In May 2016, after the Assam Assembly elections the North-East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) was formed by the BJP. It included all the 8 north-eastern states since by then all the states were ruled by the BJP or its allies. Himanta Biswa Sarma was the convenor of the NEDA. The sole purpose of the NEDA was to give shape to Narendra Modi's slogan of, "Congress mukt Bharat" (an India divested of the Congress Party). Himanta's antipathy towards the Congress - a party where he cut his political teeth was evident from his public speeches where he regularly lambasts the Nehru-Gandhi family and Rahul Gandhi in particular. When Rahul Gandhi visited Assam during the Bharat Jodo Yatra in January 2024 Biswa Sarma did his best to make it difficult for him to move across the state.

It does not take much to figure out why the Assam CM is despondent after securing only 16 of the 25 seats in the 8 North Eastern states. If he had got as many seats as in 2019 or even more, his clout in the BJP fraternity would have risen and that would have added to his bargaining power. He had to find an alibi for the poor performance of the BJP and religion became an easy scapegoat. This sort of comment will further alienate the BJP in the region.

Hindutva Vrs Jaidbynriew politics: Different side of same coin?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

For those who still believe in the propaganda peddled by mainstream media, dubbed 'Godi Media' by Ravish Kumar, and claims of high-profile experts like Prashant Kishor who used their bitterness after being rejected by the Congress to do what some experts call 'ambush marketing', the election results would have come as a major shock. For others who had already understood the rule of thumb, i.e., take with a pinch of salt anything the 'Godi Media' or the experts they invite claim, it was a pleasant surprise. Yes, it was pleasantly surprising, but not a shock. Majoritarian politics, in this case, Hindutva politics, without any visible improvement in the lives of majority of the people in the country, was always a short-lived spectacle. One wonders: if Balakot had not happened, maybe the decline would have come a little earlier. Make no mistake, Hindutva politics is not yet dead, and it will continue to live on. But unless it can divorce itself from crony capitalism, the fetish for the stock market and deal with the problems plaguing the real economy, it will always be an ephemeral phenomenon, though it will never disappear. The most heartwarming story of the election was the victory of Awadhesh Prasad, a 77-year-old nine-time Dalit MLA and now first-time MP, who won from Ayodhya, the seat of Ram Mandir politics.

Dalits are the former untouchables who are at the bottom of the Hindu caste system and continue to suffer from neglect and discrimination. This year itself, in Gujarat, a Dalit groom was attacked by members of the upper castes for riding a horse during a marriage procession. Such incidents are very common, and they also include burning Dalits alive for marrying into the upper castes. Among the different caste groups, Dalits have the least amount of steppe ancestry, which proves that they were the first indigenous peoples of the subcontinent. Beginning around 3500 years ago, they were subjugated, their lands taken away from them, and then they were consigned to the lowest position in the hierarchy to serve the upper castes, or those who have a much higher percentage of steppe ancestry, i.e., the Indo-Aryans. While this election's results are very much due to the Dalits and other backward groups voting for the INDIA bloc, it sadly is not going to atone for the historical injustice that has been perpetuated on them. But the struggle for justice will continue.

Coming to our own state, we have our own story: the rise of the VPP as an important player in state politics with their victory in the Shillong seat. Having been founded just three years ago, the rise to prominence of this party has been quite

spectacular, and there is a feeling, rightly so, that they will do well in the upcoming KHADC elections as well. However, some politicians are calling this a temporary phenomenon that will die its natural death. I agree that VPP is another version of HSPDP and KHNAM (incidentally, two of the senior members have been associated with those two parties, viz., Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit and Adelbert Nongrum, respectively), but I don't think it will disappear for two reasons: Firstly, the aforementioned two parties still exist; and, secondly, the ideology that VPP espouses and what has driven this spectacular win is the 'jaidbynriew politics' which is similar to Hindutva, both of which are always going to lurk around, maybe in the corner or maybe out in the open, but always ready to demand their share of the spoils when conditions are favorable to them.

Hindutva is driven by the theme of 'Hindus are in danger' from the minorities, Muslims in particular but all non-Hindu minorities in general. In other words, it is what can be termed as the 'Hindu victimhood' mentality. This is ironic considering that Hindus make up almost 80% of the country's population, and the richest and most powerful people in the country are still mostly Hindus. Of course, this does not mean that all Hindus are rich and powerful, especially the lower castes, but in general, they are comparatively better off than the Muslims. This was strongly established by the 2006 Sachhar Committee Report which revealed that Muslims fare worse in economic terms than even the Dalits. Muslims constitute less than 15% of India's population, but they are constantly accused of trying to change the demography of the country. Hindutva activists claim that one way this is taking place is through love jihad, where Muslim men target Hindu women for conversion to Islam by means such as seduction, feigning love, deception, kidnapping, and marriage.

Right in the middle of the parliamentary election, the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council (PM-EAC) released a report that tried to show that the growth of the Muslim population has been quite high while that of the Hindu population has gone down. This was done to give credence to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's claim in a rally that "those who have more children" will take away a large chunk of India's resources. In other speeches, he specifically called out the Muslims, and in one place, he even mentioned the Christian community, particularly the use of Sunday as a holiday, which he claims is a Christian practice and not of the Hindus. Earlier he

had declared December 25 as Good Governance Day, fully aware that it is an auspicious day for Christians. Hindutva is the politics of creating a siege mentality among the Hindus that, though they are demographically dominant and socio-economically better off, they are somehow in danger of being overwhelmed by the other communities, and therefore they should band together against the 'others'. Does all of this remind us of something closer at home?

In Meghalaya, especially in the Khasi region (which includes East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, South West Khasi Hills, Eastern West Khasi Hills, West Jaintia Hills, East Jaintia Hills, and Ri Bhoi), 'jaidbynriew politics' has held strong sway over the state for a very long time and has similar features to Hindutva. There has been a long-standing demand for ILP in the state, driven by fear of a demographic change. As a small community, the threat of becoming a Tripura is always a haunting specter, but the demographic trends in the state paint a very different picture. Since statehood, the share of the non-indigenous population has been going down from 19.52% in 1971 to 13.85% in 2011. The 2021 Census was not conducted because of COVID-19, but it is highly unlikely that the trend has changed, especially considering the fact that opportunities for the indigenous population have themselves become highly limited. Opportunities are already quite limited for the non-indigenous population, and this creates more pressure on them to go out in search of better options. So, it will be very surprising if the trend established for the last 50 years somehow changes. Those that remain behind face additional difficulties when they want to do business, whether in the form of trading licenses or extortions/donations.

Last year, the police caught many gangs that were extorting money from non-indigenous business establishments. Are we sure that the threat of extortion has been completely removed? I will leave that for the readers to find out by talking to, if they know any, non-indigenous business persons. Then there is this 'Khasi victimhood' where there is a perception that the government is swift in taking action if a crime has been committed by the Khasi but lax when it is committed by a non-Khasi or non-indigenous person. The reality is that, if one were to collect data on the violent incidents in the state, it would reveal that the non-indigenous population has been disproportionately affected, rather than the other way around. And then there's the eternal angst of outsiders marrying Khasi women ostensibly for land and prop-

erty. That is frowned upon because it is believed that such marriages will dilute the 'Khasi blood', which is an unscientific claim because there is nothing called 'Khasi blood' but there are 'Khasi people' whose genetic history (which I will discuss in a future submission) tells the story of a high degree of admixture with non-Khasi groups over many generations. Just for a peek, I would suggest that those who want to know what I am going to write first read the free extract of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's book 'Funeral Nights' from the internet on the origin of Hima Sohra. The rest I will share later.

After VPP won four seats in the last Assembly election, they added another dimension to 'jaidbynriew politics', where it is not just the non-indigenous community that is a threat to the Khasi, but the danger is from a fellow indigenous community, the Garo. The whole reservation protest demanded the reworking of the reservation formula in the state to give Khasi a greater share based on their population. At the same time, Khasi were also adamant that the future roster system that was being implemented after the High Court's order should not be retrospective because that would lead to the majority of future posts being reserved for the Garo, who until now have been underrepresented. So, a very paradoxical situation developed: the Khasi were but at the same time, they didn't want the Garo to get back their share, from which they were deprived in violation of the reservation quota. This is a classic example of the 'Khasi victimhood' mentality, which was fueling the demand for a review of the reservation policy.

So, 'jaidbynriew politics' and Hindutva are just mirror images of each other. No wonder Albert Thyrnriang termed the VPP the Khasi BJP, which is very accurate. Of course, this will offend the supporters of the VPP just as it will offend the supporters of the BJP to suggest that they are similar. But looked at without bias, the similarity is there. The BJP is a much bigger party, and since it has ruled the country quite a few times, it is difficult to see them changing their ideology. VPP, on the other hand, is a new party and can still chart its own course where it can rise above 'jaidbynriew politics'. That's the only way it can grow as a party and have a long-term future in the state because there will be those who promise more and will be more zealous than them in pursuit of 'jaidbynriew politics'. In a multi-ethnic state like Meghalaya, that is not sustainable in the long run.

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

Narendra Modi's battle with Sangh Parivar shows no signs of easing Nitin Gadkari and Shivraj Singh Chouhan emerge as critics of PM-Elect

By Arun Srivastava

It was shocking to see incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who is even followed and revered by Lord Jagannath of Puri, prostrating before two mortal politicians Nitish Kumar and Chandrababu Naidu for their support to satiate his desire for becoming prime minister for third consecutive term. In a phase when the saints and religious gurus nurse earthly craving for enjoying political power, a politician certainly cannot be expected to perform a reverse role and behave like a saint.

Narendra Modi projecting himself as Lord Vishnu and his forthright old claim "he was 'convinced' that he was 'sent by god'", simply reinforces his sadistic quest for power. To strengthen his claim for power, he had even said that the energy he possesses cannot come from a biological body and only god could give him this type of energy. People of India have seen how to quench his thirst for absolute power, he allowed the Gujarat pogrom to happen. He would have put a break to the violence but did not as that provided him with the opportunity to polarise the Hindus to build a strong base. Standing on that he could rule for decades. Anyone who came his way was shown his place. People are yet to forget his seeking vote in 2019 exploiting Pulwama massacre.

Modi nevertheless is clear about thing; for ascending to the top political position. It is imperative that you should

these offices to them. A question is doing the rounds of political circles as to why he is hell bent on becoming the prime minister for the third time. The reply is very simple. He wants to project himself as equal to Pandit Nehru, who was also the prime minister for three consecutive terms. It is the greatest achievement for a person suffering from an acute inferiority complex. At least he would be counted as one above the others. Already the national media has started eulogising him for his achievement.

His desperation to occupy the office of prime minister got reflected in his move to manoeuvre the NDA meeting which allegedly elected him as the leader of NDA. Modi initially should have been elected by the newly elected MPs after getting the approval of the national body of the party. But he was not sure of getting the clearance as many senior leaders were opposed to his continuance. They had told the RSS leadership in no uncertain terms that people had rejected him.

Modi loyalists and especially the Gujarat lobby has been citing the invitation letters sent to the state heads of the neighbouring countries for attending the swearing ceremony. They have been arguing that if Modi is not allowed to become prime minister, it would be humiliating for India. But the RSS leaders as well as senior leaders are not willing to listen to this ridiculous argu-

That would prove to be productive as it would catch the imagination of the people; look here is the leader who has guts to challenge the Nehruvian hegemony. He has proved to be right. He made other BJP leaders, even of senior stature, look like dwarfs. Modi acquired the status of monarch, no body dared to open his mouth, his words resonated like laws.

target the tallest person, not the minions. He knew that to score in the game of political one-upmanship he must target the Nehru-Gandhi family, the first family of India. That would prove to be productive as it would catch the imagination of the people; look here is the leader who has guts to challenge the Nehruvian hegemony. He has proved to be right. He made other BJP leaders, even of senior stature, look like dwarfs. Modi acquired the status of monarch, no body dared to open his mouth, his words resonated like laws.

Riding on this borrowed political power, courtesy Nehru-Gandhi family, he dictated the politics and even side lined most of the senior BJP and RSS leaders. It is a fact that during his ten year stay in power, he never visited RSS office in Nagpur and did not cheer any of the senior RSS leaders. RSS had the practice of assigning its one of the senior leaders as the general secretary (organisation) of BJP. But Modi did away with this practice. The most significant incident to take note is, Modi never visited RSS headquarters to call on RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat. His meetings took place outside Nagpur while Bhagwat was on some tour. Stories about his arrogance are in abundance.

Obviously it was quite shocking to see Modi prostrating before Nitish and Naidu. An insight into his changed behaviour nonetheless underscores that it is not natural, it is an act to conceal his real intentions. It is a mask. He knows that he has overcome the crisis for the time being. Once he is firmly settled in power, he would start showing his true colours. Basically this is the reason that he is not willing to concede to the demands of Nitish and Naidu to give them the post of Speaker, Home and Finance. He would lose the overall dominance once he concedes

ment. The RSS leaders want to know at whose advice they sent the invitation? Invitations have already been sent to Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Sri Lanka President Ranil Wickremesinghe, and Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'. Around 8,000 dignitaries have been invited.

According to RSS sources, this clearly manifests the autocratic functioning of Modi. There is a lurking apprehension in the RSS that he would turn more aggressive and autocratic if he comes to occupy the office by manoeuvring the situation and support. In view of RSS leaders adopting a no-nonsense approach to this issue, Amit Shah had summoned some RSS leaders at his residence this week to thrash out the issue. But it does not appear that he has achieved a major breakthrough.

RSS leaders are also quite cut up at Modi's move to distribute the ministries and at the so-called composition of the Union Council of Ministers led by Modi. Barring Arun Kumar who is the interface between the party and the Sangh, no senior leader attended the meeting held at Shah's place. Quite significantly, the meeting, held two days after the BJP lost majority in Lok Sabha coincided with the meeting the BJP leadership held to work out a formula for Cabinet formation and negotiations on the nature and participation of partners in the coalition government.

Two leaders Nitin Gadkari and Shivraj Singh Chouhan are in constant touch with RSS. Even after Modi's election as the leader of the BJP Parliamentary Party and the NDA, the fissures within the BJP will continue. It is to be seen how Prime Minister elect Narendra Modi and RSS boss Mohan Bhagwat arrive at an understanding on the future course of action. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Govt should get its act together

Editor, I am writing to express my deep concern and frustration regarding the state of basic infrastructure, particularly the roads, in our region. The recent hunger strike by Bindas Syiem, an elderly resident of Umden shines a glaring spotlight on the gross negligence of the government towards the well-being and safety of its citizens. Syiem's desperate plea for the construction of the Nongpoh-Umden-Sonapur road is not just an individual's outcry; it echoes the sentiments of an entire community tired of broken promises and crumbling infrastructure. Her bold act of protest, sitting outside the Secretariat, starving herself until her demands are met, speaks volumes about the severity of the issue at hand. It is utterly shameful that elected representatives, who are entrusted with the re-

sponsibility of serving the people, have failed miserably in fulfilling their duties. Promises have been made, speeches have been delivered, but when it comes to action, there's nothing but empty rhetoric and apathy. The sorry state of the Nongpoh-Umden-Sonapur road is a testament to this neglect. Despite repeated appeals and meetings with authorities, including the Ri-Bhoi Deputy Commissioner and the Executive Engineer, PWD (Roads), no concrete steps have been taken to address the deteriorating condition of the road. Syiem's refusal to meet the Deputy Chief Minister in-charge of PWD (Roads) highlights the sheer frustration and disillusionment of the public with the government's lackadaisical attitude. It is high time for the government to wake up from its slumber and prioritize the basic needs of its citizens. Access to safe and well-maintained roads is not a luxury; it is a fundamental right. The lives and livelihoods of thousands of people depend on them.

Therefore, I urge the concerned authorities to immediately take action to improve the Nongpoh-Umden-Sonapur road and other neglected infrastructure projects in our region. The people have suffered enough; it's time for the government to deliver on its promises and restore our faith in democracy. Yours etc., R Sarki Shillong

Protest the lifeblood of democracy

Editor, Bindas Syiem is a shining example of what civil society should be doing in a democracy. We have had enough examples of people moaning and grumbling inside their homes when things don't work - when roads are eaten up by rain water immediately after being constructed - which is the norm in Meghalaya. We don't have a thriving civil society that has a one-point agenda of

demanding what is due to the public - namely roads, water supply, an efficient education system, uninterrupted power to name a few. For fifty years we have lived with substandard infrastructure. The rains and flash-floods have been blamed for the poor road conditions and the bridges being carried away by the floods. Recently we read of the collapse of the wall around the PA Sangma stadium in Tura for the second time. How can the people of Garo Hills tolerate such levels of corruption? They have to rise up in one voice and demand that the contractor/s be blacklisted and the work be given to some other contractor/s with a clean record and the contract must be given out in a transparent manner. There is too much lobbying and obfuscation in the award of contracts. The contractors do a sub-standard job because they have to shell out money to give to politicians, engineers, pressure groups et al. How can any development ever happen in this State? When the political masters in the government are

themselves so corrupt, how can they ever fight corruption? Meghalaya is on a downward slide and this will continue because we the people have chosen to allow them to enrich themselves at our expense. I hope and pray that the action of Bindas Syiem will be a force multiplier and many more like her will come out to the streets to demand their rights from a system created to deliver the public good and not personal wealth accumulation. Yours etc., Amelia Nongspung, Via email

INTACH clarification

Editor, Apropos of the report, "Govt's ambitious Barik Complex project gets civil society red flag," (ST June 7, 2024) I would like to clarify on a few points vis a vis the report. The PWD complex at Barik Point was initially the barracks for the British and American GI's during the Second World War, hence

the name Barik which is the Khasi pronunciation for barracks. One would also notice that the structure of the buildings were designed as such. I feel all lovers of heritage buildings and properties are custodians of Old Shillong. About two weeks ago, the Chief Minister along with various officials conducted a ground survey of the PWD Complex at Barik (video available at various social media sites). Having taken the views of the public and civil society into consideration, the Government has decided to retain the important heritage buildings at the PWD Complex, Barik Point and repurpose them to provide creative and constructive spaces for the public. Yours etc., Dr Madeline Y Tham Via email

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

Groundwater is heating up, threatens life below and above the surface

Under your feet lies the world's biggest reservoir. Groundwater makes up a whopping 97% of all usable freshwater. Where is it? In the voids between grains and cracks within rocks. We see it when it rises to the surface in springs, in caves, or when we pump it up for use.

While groundwater is often hidden, it underpins ecosystems around the world and is a vital resource for people.

You might think groundwater would be protected from climate change, given it's underground. But this is no longer the case. As the atmosphere continues to heat up, more and more heat is penetrating underground. There is already considerable evidence that the subsurface is warming. The heat shows up in temperature measurements taken in boreholes around the world.

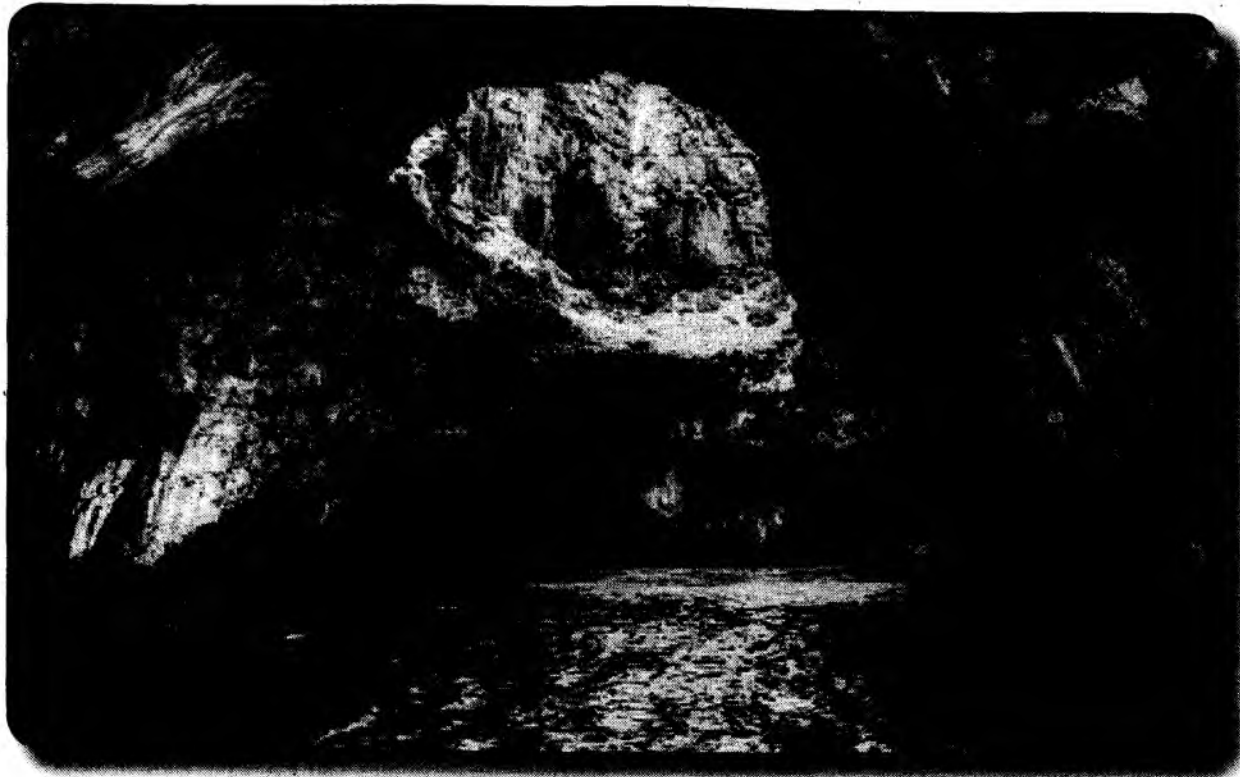
A team of international scientists combined their knowledge to model how groundwater will heat up in the future. Under a realistic middle of the road greenhouse gas emission scenario, with a projected mean global atmospheric temperature rise of 2.7°C, groundwater will warm by an average of 2.1°C by 2100, compared to 2000.

This warming varies by region and is delayed by decades compared to the surface, because it takes time to heat up the underground mass.

Why does it matter?

You might wonder what the consequences of hotter groundwater will be.

First, the good news. Warming beneath the land's surface is trapping 25 times less energy than the ocean, but it is still significant. This heat is stored in layers down to tens of metres deep, making it easier to access. We could use this extra heat to sustainably warm our homes by tapping into it just a few meters below the surface.



The heat can be extracted using heat pumps, powered by electricity from renewable energies. Geothermal heat pumps are surging in popularity for space heating across Europe.

Unfortunately, the bad news is likely to far outweigh the good. Warmer groundwater is harmful for the rich array of life found underground - and for the many plants and animals who depend on groundwater for their survival. Any changes in temperature can seriously disrupt the niche they have adapted to.

To date, the highest groundwater temperature increases are in parts of Russia, where surface temperatures have risen by more than 1.5°C since 2000. In Australia, significant variations in groundwater temperatures are expected within the shallowest layers.

Groundwater regularly flows out to feed lakes and rivers around the world, as well as the ocean,

supporting a range of groundwater dependent ecosystems.

If warmer groundwater flows into your favourite river or lake, it will add to the extra heat from the sun. This could mean fish and other species will find it too warm to survive.

Warm waters also hold less oxygen. Lack of oxygen in rivers and lakes have already become a major cause of mass fish deaths, as we've seen recently in Australia's Murray-Darling Basin.

Cold water species such as Atlantic salmon have adapted to a water temperature window provided by continuous cool groundwater discharge. As these thermal refuges heat up, it will upend their breeding cycle.

Groundwater is vital

In many parts of the world, people rely on groundwater as their main source of drinking water. But

groundwater warming can worsen the quality of the water we drink. Temperature influences everything from chemical reactions to microbial activity. Warmer water could, for instance, trigger more harmful reactions, where metals leach out into the water. This is especially concerning in areas where access to clean drinking water is already limited.

Industries such as farming, manufacturing and energy production often rely on groundwater for their operations. If the groundwater they depend on becomes too warm or more contaminated, it can disrupt their activities.

Global groundwater warming is a hidden but very significant consequence of climate change. While the impacts will be delayed, they stretch far and wide. They will affect ecosystems, drinking water supplies and industries around the world. *(The Conversation)*

'Aggression, confusion, altered behaviour may signal brain tumour risk'

Erratic mental health symptoms like aggression, confusion, altered behaviour, and persistent headaches may indicate the potential risk of a brain tumour, experts said.

Brain Tumour Day is observed every year on June 8 to raise awareness about the debilitating disease that can make it hard for people to learn, plan, make decisions, concentrate, and make decisions. Brain tumours are abnormal uncontrolled growth of cells in the brain. They can be malignant or non-malignant.

"Brain tumours frequently mirror psychiatric symptoms, presenting as aggression, confusion, altered behaviour, irrelevant speech due to comprehension impairment, apathy, emotional instability, or disorientation," Dr K Chandrasekar, Senior Consultant Neurosurgeon, Apollo Cancer Institutes, told IANS.

The complexity of these symptoms underlines the deceptive nature of such serious mental conditions as potential indicators of a brain tumour.

Dr Kersi Chavda, Consultant Psychiatry, P.D. Hinduja Hospital & Medical Research Centre, Mahim told IANS that very often the signs and symptoms of a brain tumour mimic a mental illness.

"Memory problems like difficulty with short-term memory and forming new memories; changes in behaviour or personality; difficulty understanding or producing speech; vision problems; persistent head-

aches; and loss of coordination and balance are some of the symptoms of brain tumour that mimic psychiatric issues," he added.

Dr Ashish Srivastava, Head of Neurosurgery at Dharamshila Narayana Hospital, told IANS that often people do not pay attention to these symptoms of brain tumours, which can lead to severe consequences later.

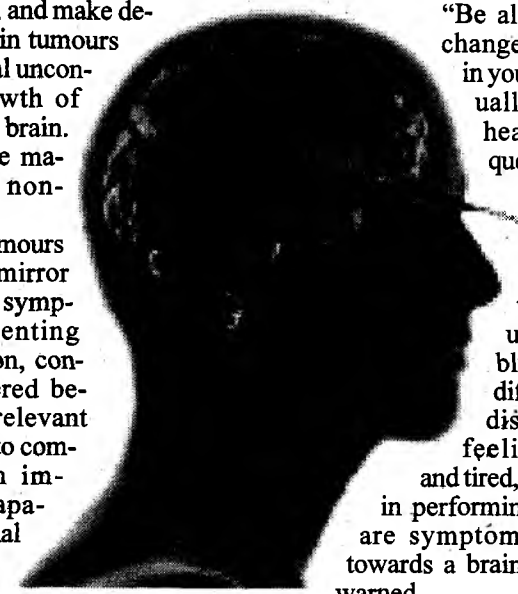
"Be alert about the changes happening in your body. Gradually increasing headaches, frequent headaches, not getting enough sleep, difficulty in thinking and understanding, blurred vision, difficulty seeing distant objects, feeling sluggish and tired, and problems in performing daily tasks are symptoms that point towards a brain tumour," he warned.

Other common symptoms include vomiting, nausea, paralysis, vision loss, and walking difficulties.

MRI and CT, as well as PET scans, can detect brain tumours.

"Brain tumours which are non-cancerous can be treated with radiotherapy techniques like CyberKnife or Gamma Knife if less than 3.5 cms," Dr Anshu Rohtagi, Senior Consultant, Department of Neurology at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, told IANS.

Further, advanced technology like MRI-guided laser ablation and laser interstitial thermal therapy can help not only locate tumours in the brain but also precisely destroy the tumour cells with heat or lasers, she added. *(IANS)*



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, June 9, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Mars semi-square Jupiter on your solar return chart. It is going to bring exceptional results for you. Professionally you will grow and get success. There will be ample job offers to avail. You will also keep your bosses and subordinates happy. Those in business will get good offers and plan a major expansion. Your financial condition will remain stable. You will also come in contact with lot of influential persons who will help you a lot. Business trips will keep you busy. Those who are single will get suitable marriage proposals. Lovebirds will be having wonderful time and will also be able to realise their dreams. You will manage to impress people by your communication skills and in depth knowledge. A good combination of will and wisdom will put you ahead in life. You will celebrate some auspicious function with your family. **This week for you'**

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Your self-confidence and positive attitude will reward you. Constructive connections with others can be made fairly easily. A comfortable level of personal popularity helps to keep conflict to a minimum. Your attitude towards life would be changing. You are no longer willing to make compromises in the important areas of your life, particularly with regard to career. You are more determined, and it is an excellent time to get rid of bad habits. A new project or goal begun now has a good chance of being successful and long-lasting. You would be able to find a way to strike a balance between self-gratification and the obligations of daily life.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This phase brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for betterment and expansion. People are bound to recognize your leadership skills and talents. You want your life path and your objectives to reflect what you're really about. A balanced approach to life, in terms of realistic expectations, is the best approach for maximizing success. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do in the coming weeks.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) There will be harmonious relations in professional and personal life. Positive new relationships are formed. You are instinctively starting a new phase in your life. It is time to give your life a makeover, a time of new beginnings and fresh energy. It is a friendly time, when it is easy to enjoy life and other people. Focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends and exploration. A new project begun has a good chance of being successful and long-lasting. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. You have to get yourself organized and work to build your resources.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This period brings good financial returns as you communicate well and present cordial relations with co-workers. You are inspired and could even inspire others with your words. You think more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You want your objectives to reflect what you are really about, and you are likely to rid yourself of unsatisfying goals. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. You possess a strong artistic sensitivity, and you are able to express your feelings openly and candidly.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) This is a period of work and development and a boost to your self-confidence. It is a time to deal with practical matters, and it is not a time to be lazy or especially gregarious. It can be a time that feels hard, monotonous and lonely. Try to get yourself organized, work to build your resources, keep busy. Your main focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends, and exploration. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. It is also a good time for expressing your creativity. Reach out, but avoid scattering your energies.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) The planetary configuration brings unusualness and curiosity in your relationships as you feel they are more important to you. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental. This is a good time for reflection, prayer, and meditation. A higher purpose to your life is what you seek, and you rely more heavily upon your intuition in order to achieve it. Your physical activities tend

to be more intense, passionate, and focused this week. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. The way you present your ideas, certainly helping to smooth over differences in your personal relationships

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) New associations and beginnings as well as new opportunities and changes come your way. You would form new connections and relationships that enhance your spiritual and personal growth. Your popularity increases and efforts to smooth over challenges in partnerships are more likely to succeed. This is an excellent influence for negotiations, marriage, and business partnerships. You are likely to be actively involved with teamwork and collaboration with others. You are taking on new responsibilities, but generally enjoy the challenges.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 21) You have to get yourself organized, work to build your resources and keep busy. There are better financial returns. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. You might find that you are very often encouraging and supportive of others. Certainly, you are more accepting and understanding of your friends and loved ones. Emotional security and being content in love will help to attract positive circumstances into your life. You are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. Advice - stand alone, take action, start afresh and express independence.

Sagittarius: (November 22 - December 21) New horizons in your romantic and love life open up. You might enjoy a favorable outcome when it comes to legal affairs, education, and travel. This week, you're bound to enjoy increased social opportunities as well as a boost in your personal popularity and magnetism. You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You have powerful, transformative energy at your disposal. It is likely to be a rather lighthearted time, when opportunities are greater than usual. Much will depend on how you handle it. Channelled positively, you could move mountains when it comes to pushing your projects ahead. If mishandled, however, you could be argumentative, stressed, and hell-bent on having your way. Avoid taking extreme measures to make things happen your way, and avoid people who might be doing the same. You need not over-analyze personal relationships but rather respond with your heart and deep feelings; as a new understanding and maturity with others around you at home and work.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) There will be mixed results in domestic life and people you care for. You are practical, realistic, and your judgment is especially sound - and you derive much satisfaction from practical accomplishment. The key to harnessing this wonderful energy is to identify and find pleasure in the simple things that make you happy. You might enjoy a favorable outcome when it comes to legal affairs and travel. Financial benefits come your way. You find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. It is time to learn your feelings and ideas and share what you have learned through a variety of experiences in this life.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) The ability to express and communicate your ideas is extremely important to you this time. Surprises surrounding intimate matters, shared finances and resources and financial support will be in store. You spend more time on phone calls, emails, short frequent trips and communicating with friends. You pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. Your attention turns to domestic matters for a large part of the time and building, decoration and purchase of households for your home figures strongly now.

Can Alzheimer's really be reversed, as a new documentary claims?

Two people diagnosed with Alzheimer's claim to have conquered the disease through simple lifestyle changes.

Dementia and Alzheimer's have been the leading killers in the UK for the last ten years, accounting for 11.4% of deaths in 2022. Although new drugs can reduce the disease's progression, more evidence is emerging that something as simple as integrating a healthy lifestyle can "reverse" symptoms of Alzheimer's.

Alzheimer's disease can be split in two subgroups, familial and sporadic. Only 5% of patients with Alzheimer's are familial, inherited, and 95% of Alzheimer's patients are sporadic, due to environmental, lifestyle and genetic risk factors. Consequently, the most effective tactic for tackling Alzheimer's is preventative and living a healthy lifestyle. This has led researchers to study risk factors associated with Alzheimer's.

Two Alzheimer's sufferers, Cici Zerbe and Simon Nicholls, claim to have beaten the deadly disease with straightforward lifestyle changes. The pair have detailed their journey in a *CNN* documentary *The Last Alzheimer's Patient*.

Zerbe experienced a reversal of symptoms after participating in a clinical trial in the US. The trial explores the effects of intensive lifestyle changes on mild cognitive impairment or early dementia due to Alzheimer's disease. The study has not yet been published.

Lifestyle changes include switching to a plant-based diet, regular exercise, group support sessions, yoga and meditation. Zerbe said that she feels "much better" than she did before taking part in the trial five years ago, when she was diagnosed with the disease.

Remarkable improvements

Simon Nicholls, aged 55, is another person with Alzheimer's who is featured in the *CNN* documentary and who took part in the trial. Nicholls carries two copies of a gene variant called ApoE4, which is

known to significantly increase the risk of Alzheimer's. However, after adopting healthy lifestyle changes, Nicholls saw remarkable improvements in his symptoms.

About 25% of the population carry at least one copy of the ApoE4 gene variant (called an "allele") and 5% carry two copies. Carrying one ApoE4 allele is associated with a three to four times increased risk of developing Alzheimer's. Carrying two copies increases the risk up to 12-fold, rendering it the greatest genetic risk factor for Alzheimer's.

These statistics amplify the remarkable and noteworthy nature of Nicholls's achievement in reversing his symptoms of Alzheimer's simply through his lifestyle choices. His biomarkers for Alzheimer's disappeared in 14 months, which is considerably more effective than most treatments for Alzheimer's.

Nicholls highlighted physical activity and dietary changes as paramount to his journey. At first, he was prescribed tirzepatide, a drug designed to suppress appetite by regulating blood sugar levels. He also incorporated regular exercise, including strength training three times a week, walking 10,000 steps daily and jogging or cycling every morning.

Cardiovascular disease is a major risk factor and potential future predictor of Alzheimer's. The heart-brain connection is crucial for providing brain cells with energy and oxygen through cerebral blood flow. Thus, poor heart health could increase the risk of Alzheimer's as brain cells receive less energy to function.

This explains why Nicholls's improved heart health and increased cardiovascular activity have improved his symptoms.

He also enforced dietary changes - removing sugar, alcohol and processed foods - and embraced the Mediterranean diet.

The Mediterranean diet is high in antioxidants, which protect brain cells from damage and research suggests the nutrients gained from the diet help maintain memory and

cognitive skills. A recent extensive study on 60,000 Britons showed that adhering to a Mediterranean diet decreases the risk of dementia by 23%.

Nicholls has also been implementing good sleep hygiene to try and improve his irregular sleep pattern, as some studies show that sleep deprivation is linked to Alzheimer's.

The dominant theory is that during sleep toxic proteins, such as amyloid, can be flushed away with the lymphatic system. These would otherwise accumulate and cause dementia. Although, it should be noted that a recent study in mice draws this theory into question.

Scientists from Imperial College London found that clearance of toxins was actually reduced during sleep, suggesting that sleep may reduce dementia risk through other mechanisms currently unknown.

These lifestyle changes had significant effects on Nicholls's life. In just nine weeks, he lost almost 10kg and 80% of his body fat and reduced his fasting blood sugar levels.

Nicholls and Zerbe arguably did "reverse" their symptoms of Alzheimer's. This is because conditions such as obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, high cholesterol and insomnia are all risk factors for dementia, and can be modified through a healthy lifestyle.

However, it is important to interpret these findings with caution. These are only results from two people on the trial. Without the specifics of the claimed results, it is difficult to determine whether these lifestyle choices have truly "reversed" the progression of the disease.

The effect of lifestyle on cognition is gaining attention, with more scientists investigating the benefits. Combining the advent of new disease-modifying drugs with strict lifestyle changes may significantly reduce symptoms and the progression of Alzheimer's. *(The Conversation)*

"Virtue is an inner strength. It expands your nature."

—John Bradshaw

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 299 SHILLONG, MONDAY, JUNE 10, 2024

Carry on, PM

THE NDA under Prime Minister Narendra Modi took charge of the nation's governance for the third consecutive term on Sunday on a note of optimism. This is despite the confused party positions in the new Parliament, where the BJP's and Modi's dominance has been tamed. Now that the new government has been installed, chances are that it would weather future political storms. The electorate has granted the BJP, the central political force, a solid 240-seats though the saffron party will have to depend on those outside of the old dependable allies for its sustenance. This is significant.

The Telegu Desam and Janata Dal United have pledged their support and are now major partners in the government. Even if they throw tantrums in the days ahead, the composition of the Lok Sabha is such that the BJP has ample scope and space for manoeuvring. Over 10 parties got one each seat while several parties outside of the NDA have three or more seats each. For a governing establishment, enticing many of them is no big shakes. That both Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar understand this arithmetic is clear from the spirit of all-out cooperation, not bargaining, that they are now extending to BJP and Modi. A break-up of the BJP is next to impossible unlike other political establishments. A common thread binds its MPs. All these should be good signs for the nation's stability. The Congress party, appreciably, has not attempted a counter to the BJP's move to form the government. The party or its INDIA alliance is far from being a strong force. The electorate did not want these parties to govern the nation now, but only act as a strong opposition and keep the BJP government under some control. Those like Mamata Banerjee of the TMC boycotted the swearing-in event in tune with her professed anti-BJP stance. At the outset, she had hinted at efforts by INDIA to explore possibilities of a government and proposed Nitish Kumar as PM if only to spite the Congress and Rahul Gandhi. This did not gain traction. Her unbeatable position in West Bengal however stands reinforced.

Modi, as also the BJP, is bound to face increased pressure on multiple fronts during his present innings due to internal power plays and external meddling. He did well by avoiding induction of the NCP nominee on the ground he was facing serious corruption charges. More issues would come up. Yogi Adityanath and Shivraj Singh Chouhan as well as Modi's second line of ministers will be in competition for the upper hand in future. Naidu and Kumar were Modi's 'enemies' in the past. No one 'hated' Modi as much as these two but as they say politics is the art of the possible. The two are with the NDA now because the situations warranted so.

VPP and the challenges ahead

By HH Mohrmen

The victory of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) by a significant margin to clinch the Shillong parliamentary seat has raised many eyebrows. Formed in November 19, 2021, the party which is in a nascent stage has grown from just four MLAs and now it is adding an MP to its force. Although it was expected that the party's candidate would win the Shillong parliamentary seat, the margin was beyond any expectation. It remains to be seen how far the party can go in the future.

In its short journey, the VPP has also received its fair share of criticism, which is not surprising at all. The party's meteoric rise in popularity is bound to attract criticism, especially from adversaries who see it as a threat to their own existence. But the road ahead for the party is definitely not going to be smooth; it is going to be a winding journey through difficult terrain. The question is how the party will navigate the challenges ahead and prove their detractors wrong. Critics on the other hand, have upped their ante to challenge the sudden rise of the party and they are ready with their criticism against the party.

Using God and Religion in Politics

Some of the party's critics term the approach used by the VPP to capture power in politics by using God and quoting from religious scriptures as "Theonomy." It was elucidated that "Theonomy" is a combination of two Greek words: "theos," which means God, and "nomos," which is Greek for law. "Theonomy" is a Christian form of government in which society is ruled by divine law, particularly the judicial laws of the Old Testament, which should be observed by modern societies.

It was also argued that those who hold this kind of belief will have followers who will blindly follow what their leaders say because they believe they are just following the will of God. Anybody who disagrees with them is seen as disagreeing with God's will. It was also alleged that only verses from the Bible are being quoted, and they have yet to hear verses from other religious scriptures quoted in party meetings. But the party reiterates that it holds fast to the principles and values of the Constitution of the country.

Perhaps since most of the leaders are Christian, it is not surprising that they quote from the Bible.

Is VPP taking the State in a Christian Right direction?

A section of society also alleged that VPP is taking the state in a Christian right direction and warned that this will alienate non-Christians from the Party. The Party's detractors opine that the Party leaders quoting only from the Bible will alienate people of the indigenous faith. It remains to be seen if the Party will walk in the direction that their critics have predicted or remain a secular party that abides by the Constitution. The VPP will be able to dispel their detractors' view of them as a religious fundamentalist group only if it can attract leaders from other religious groups too.

The Jaidbyrniew Party

Another contention against the party is that it is a Khasi-Jaintia-centric party; it is alleged that the party caters to the needs and interests of the people of this one part of the state only. The party's detractors illustrate that the demand for reviewing the state's job reservation policy was for the interest of the Khasi-Jaintia and Ri Bhoi region of the state only. It was also alleged that the party is using the so-called "Khasi Victimhood" to win the support of the hoi polloi in the region. The question is, if the party wants to be a force to reckon with in state politics, can it afford to be communal and stay focused on the "jaidbyrniew" issue only?

Is VPP promoting demagoguery?

A rejoinder to my article in The Shillong Times on the rise of the VPP alleged that the Party is promoting demagoguery, and this is a very dangerous development. It is understandable that they are referring to the leader of the party, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit. The subsequent letter supporting this argument listed a long list of demagogues in the world from the time of the Greeks to present-day leaders who the writer considers to be demagogues.

Is it even fair and reasonable to compare the leader of the VPP with many demagogues in the world? That is for the public to decide. The writer provided a list of

modern-day demagogues and how they rose to power, like Russian President Vladimir Putin, Turkish Head of State Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, and even Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The question is, can Ardent become a demagogue? Is it even fair to expect him to be a demagogue, or is he a demagogue in the making? Only time will tell, but does he show traits of being a rising demagogue?

Hyper-emotional and populist campaign

During the election, it was also alleged that the party created a hyper-emotional scenario (Shongshit) among its followers, which was obvious throughout the entire election campaign for the Lok Sabha. A senior politician in the state had predicted that the rise of the VPP is a populist appeal which is temporary and not going to last long. A reality check - Can we say that the 5,71,078 votes for the VPP, which is more than half of the votes polled are a result of emotions running high? Surprisingly, all the remaining five candidates together could only muster 466,833 votes, which is nowhere near the halfway mark, then if we say it is but populist appeal, are we not questioning the wisdom of the public?

Politics a long-distance race

Paul Lyngdoh made a statement to the media that politics is a long-distance race, obliquely referring to VPP's clean politics campaign and rebuking it as an unrealistic goal. The impression given is that the party may succeed in one or two elections but will not be able to sustain itself in the long run. They may not need as much money as other parties to contest the election, but they will definitely need money to run the day-to-day affairs of the party. Paul, being a senior and shrewd politician is not wrong in making this assertion. However, the last election has proven that the VPP used very little money in their campaign.

Road to the Assembly via the ADCs

The final goal of the VPP is to win the assembly elections; that is how they can bring change to the state. However, for the Party the

journey to the Assembly is via the ADCs and unfortunately, the councils have their own issues and challenges. Since the ADCs do not fall under the purview of the Tenth Schedule or the Anti-Defection Law, the most common problem in the ADCs is the defection of the MDCs. It can be a challenge for the VPP to keep its flock together if and when it wins the two councils. Dr. Batskhem Myrbob, the spokesperson of the party, said that the process of choosing a candidate will start from the very beginning, as the party will be careful in selecting candidates before the party ticket is allotted to a person. After winning the MP election, there will be a long queue of prospective candidates vying for the party ticket, and they can certainly afford to be selective. This will make the job both easy and difficult for the party leaders. Myrbob also said in one of the panel discussions that the top tier of the party does not necessarily need to be politicians; hence, they can be objective in their selection of the candidates.

The road to the assembly will also largely depend on how the VPP performs if and when it runs the ADCs, as people will judge the Party's performance in the ADCs. It is certainly not going to be an easy task because the VPP will have only less than four years until the 2028 assembly elections to prove that they it is worth the mantle. The question is, what new policies, programs, or projects is VPP going to introduce in the two ADCs to show that it is different? The Party has to demonstrate to the public that VPP means business and that it is here to stay.

What makes people vote for VPP?

This column, dated April 22, observed that during the campaign for the Shillong parliamentary seats, VPP was gaining ground because it was able to connect with the people. Now the Party was able to win the hearts of more than half of the people who voted because of the three core agenda of the party: clean politics, which vows to fight against rampant corruption in the state, doing away with nepotism in appointments to government jobs and the allotment of government contracts and supply work, and eradicating poverty in the State. So to call the victory mere populist appeal is to underestimate the wisdom of the voters.

Chandrababu Naidu at Delhi's centre-stage

By Kingshuk Nag

Swings in fortune have seen him in and out of power over the last four decades. From getting close to the prime minister's post to slipping to the sidelines of Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu has returned now in his most powerful avatar yet. He holds the key to the survival of Modi 3.0. Naidu's Telugu Desam Party swept the polls with 16 out of 25 MPs and simultaneous assembly elections with 135 out of 175 MLAs. This resounding victory and his new role in supporting the NDA has made him the focus of the country's attention with speculation about what Naidu wants in return and what he will do next. His key role in shaping and supporting the governments of HD Deve Gowda, Inder Kumar Gujral and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, has given Naidu a sound track record in helping build coalition governments.

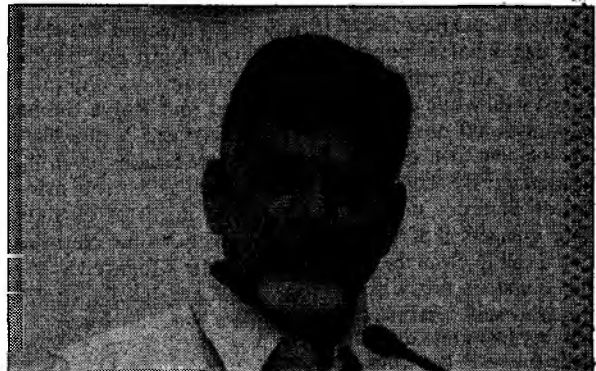
Chandrababu Naidu has supplanted both sides. He has been with the BJP; he has been with the party's opponents. He has glued together uncertain coalitions while keeping a firm hold on his home State, helming it thrice.

To understand the man of the moment, and a history of switching sides, one must go back to his early days. As a young MLA from the districts, in the early 1980s

coup to oust NTR in a leading hotel where he collected TDP MLAs. Most MLAs sided with Naidu so NTR was deposed and his son-in-law took control of the TDP and soon the government. As the new chief minister Chandrababu Naidu allied with the BJP at the Centre and when the NDA formed the government he became a favourite of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Vajpayee used to reportedly often consult Naidu.

When he came to power, Hyderabad was a backward city with dusty roads, Naidu had his own vision of development. Taking a cue from neighbouring Bangalore, Naidu began promoting hi tech industries and software skills in Hyderabad. He established Cyberabad and to express his seriousness travelled to Seattle and waited outside the office of Bill Gates of Microsoft for an hour to get an audience with him. Soon Microsoft set up a development centre in Hyderabad. This was followed by other companies and soon Hyderabad was seen as a hi-tech city. The real estate business got a boost and many institutions came up. The entire image of Hyderabad changed and even municipal services got upgraded sprucing the city.

But all this did not help win the elections and in 2004



Chandrababu Naidu used to share a room in the hostel set up in Hyderabad for legislators. His room-mate was Y S Rajasekhara Reddy who like Naidu later became the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh. A photo of leading film star Jaya Prada used to hang on the wall of their room. At that time Reddy and Naidu were friends but later they became political foes. In this election Naidu beat Jagan Mohan Reddy (son of the now deceased Rajasekhara Reddy) to come to power. Incidentally, when they shared a room in the MLA hostel, Naidu was an ardent Congressman but switched sides later as he joined the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). The TDP was founded by Telugu cine star N T Rama Rao (NTR) who was seeking to create waves in politics. With his inimitable style NTR convinced the electorate that the Congress party in Delhi was treating Andhra Pradesh like a feudal outpost and his party was an alternative to this raj.

Meanwhile NTR was also looking for a suitable groom for his daughter Bhuvaneshwari and zeroed in on Chandrababu who came from a modest rural background but was seen to be very bright. At the time when the alliance was fixed in 1981 Naidu was still a Congressman and in fact a minister in the Congress ruled State government. After NTR romped home and became the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh in 1983, Naidu left the Congress and joined hands with NTR's TDP. The fact that he lost the assembly election may have also prompted the switch over. Naidu had been with the grand old party since 1975 and was seen as a camp follower of Sanjay Gandhi.

For his first decade with the TDP, Naidu was with the organisation building the party but had no ministerial position. However, he had tremendous power within the party and this was recognised. Then in 1990, the TDP lost power in the State to the Congress party. Around that time NTR, a widower, remarried. His new bride much younger to him soon began wielding tremendous influence in the party. This was not taken too kindly by NTR's children and certainly not by his son-in-law Naidu. In 1995, Naidu launched a

Naidu's party was ousted from power. So was the Vajpayee government which reportedly advanced the elections on Naidu's advice. Naidu had been apprehensive about the 2002 Gujarat riots and its effects.

After 2004, chastened by the Telangana movement that led to the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh and creation of the new state of Telangana, a powerless Naidu now found himself in the new state of Andhra Pradesh which did not have Hyderabad (that went to Telangana); Naidu was elected to power in the new State which did not have a capital- so he decided to create Amaravati, a green field capital on the banks of the river Krishna. The name was taken from an ancient city in the neighbourhood that did not exist anymore but the new capital came up on what was farm land. Naidu had a grand plan: in his first term he had got investments from the west: US and Europe. In the second term he wanted to build his new State with investments from the East: Japan, Singapore, etc. The ancient Amaravati was a Buddhist centre. So, with a name like this for the capital, he would get investments from Buddhist countries in the East, Naidu averred.

But in the 2019 elections Naidu lost and was out of power. Before that in 2018 he had exited an old alliance with BJP. He apparently wanted a special status for Andhra from the union government that would bring more funds. But this was not forthcoming. In the 2019 elections Jagan Reddy won Andhra Pradesh and the BJP won the Centre. Jagan Reddy wanted to shift the capital to Vishakhapatnam, a port city, causing a lot of discomfiture. He increased the number of districts in Andhra and was free with handouts straining the finances of the State. This time, Andhra has switched back to its pragmatic development icon Naidu who now holds a job he has long mastered: building the State and maintaining his position in Delhi at the epicentre of a new ruling coalition.

(The writer is a senior journalist and author based in Hyderabad) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Himanta's remarks an insult to the electorate of Meghalaya

Editor,
This one guy who's trying to outdo all loudmouths in the BJP, Himanta Biswa Sarma, CM of Assam, has once again made a statement which, I'm sure, he hopes will come to the notice of his supreme leader, Modiji, Yogi and the RSS. He says that the defeat of the BJP in the three north-eastern states in the Lok Sabha elections is due to the influence of the Christian missionaries! I don't want to spend much time and space to this ridiculous statement, except for these two points: Himanta Biswa Sarma should stop acting as the 'dada' of the north-east by blaming the Christian missionaries for his party's (and allies) defeat. He can do his dadagiri in his own state. Biswa Sarma should stop interfering in Meghalaya's affairs and pretend as if he is the unparalleled leader of the north-east. He is not and will never be because, for one, he can't control his mouth! Christian missionaries are, by his allegation, responsible for the defeat of the NPP (a close ally of the BJP) in Meghalaya. This is an inexcusable insult to the electorate and people of Meghalaya, condemnable in the strongest terms. But now, can we expect our Chief Minister, the head of our state, to react to this blusterer and condemn his

statement, and stand by the people of his State? Or will he continue to be submissive to Himanta Biswa Sarma and remain quiet? Can we, as Meghalayans, feel secure with his leadership in the light of Assam's CM's verbal assault on us? Let us wait and watch!

Yours etc.,
Eugene D. Thomas,
Shillong - 6

Disgraceful remarks by Assam CM

Editor,
The electoral victory of the VPP and the Congress candidates in Shillong and Tura respectively in the recent Parliamentary elections has evoked political noises from various quarters in varying tones and wavelenghts some symphonically orchestrated and some off tune. It was shocking that in the face of losing the prestigious Jorhat seat to Gaurav Gogoi of the Congress, the Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma dared to squarely blame the Christian missionaries for preaching against the BJP as it is widely understood from his loose talk. The animosity of the BJP CM towards Christians needs no elucidation. Sadly, the NPP and its allies here have chosen to keep their mouths and eyes shut instead of condemning such statements and singling out a religious community. Is this because the NPP is part of the North East Development Alliance (NEDA) in

the Northeast headed by the BJP's Himanta Biswa Sarma? Populist agenda invested with a mood to target states or communities based on their religious beliefs is unacceptable in a civilized and secular society. The elections being over parties should strive to work in unison towards the development and prosperity of their states.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

New era of coalition government starts

Editor,
Now that the swearing in of the Modi government is complete a new era of coalition government will start with inherent compulsions which had begun emerging even before the oath-taking ceremony. JDU leader KC Tyagi had said that there should be rethinking of the Agniveer scheme as well as the UCC. Also the TDP had demanded the post of Speaker which the Party had previously held. Such challenges do persist in any coalition government. The Vajpayee government handled such situations very successfully but Modi had never faced such a situation while he was Chief Minister of Gujarat or as Prime Minister. There will now be demand for caste census in the country. The INDI Alliance has also demanded that a JPC be appointed to know the reason for fluctuations in share markets just two days before the election

results.

Few today will deny that the first two editions of the Modi government have been marked by the cavalier attitude of the executive to treat the legislature as a rubber stamp. Important bills were moved in the House with a few hours' notice even while Members of Parliament had little clue as to what they were going to debate and legislate upon. Opposition voices in Parliament and parliamentary panels — which act as mini-Houses — were smothered.

The Modi government's so-called crusade against corruption in its last term was marked by its abuse of both laws and law enforcement agencies. The Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), a draconian piece of legislation originally intended at reining in the drug mafia with impossible bail conditions, was flung at political leaders even as courts were left wondering what evidence was there against the defendants. It showed a commitment not to hunt down the corrupt but a compulsion to intimidate opponents and dissidents.

Prime Minister Modi's promise that there will be big decisions in his third term at South Block and that he will go on a hot pursuit of corruption should warm the hearts of his followers but he will come across impediments that he, as Chief Minister of Gujarat for three terms and as Prime Minister for two, has never faced in his mission. One may attribute these to the

compulsions of democracy or coalition dharma but it will now require all the skills of a seasoned negotiator to steer his government down the road towards his stated goals.

Mr Modi, however, was right when he said that dealing with the "menace of corruption is a complex task" due to increasing political greed and technology will be an important tool in this mission of ending corruption. An honest attempt to strike at the roots of graft will enable the government to allocate more resources for development and welfare schemes aimed at the weaker sections of society. But it remains to be seen if Modi 3.0 will walk the talk on these counts.

With the poor performance of the BJP riding on Modi's name, the 'supremo syndrome' where one leader, his image, the power of his words and his organised following had overshadowed the structure of a multi-party parliamentary democracy due to majority in Lok Sabha now stands rejected. The nation rejected the theory that an entire nation could trust just one person and one leader, so much so that no one else mattered. But now we are back to a familiar scenario of coalition governments that ran the country during the 1990s and 2000s, where independence was replaced by interdependence, and each party consulted its allies and even the Opposition before taking decisions. In this regard the example of Vajpayee is before us when he led a

delegation to the UN at a time when Narasimha Rao was Prime Minister. The era of unilateral decision-making featuring sudden, unexpected decisions as in the case of demonetization had stunned the nation. The bulldozer now has brakes as BJP has seen its negative impact in Uttar Pradesh.

The biggest beneficiaries of this shift will not only be the alliance partners, or the states of Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, eager for long to receive their special category status, but also the Opposition, which has grown stronger, and the various institutions, estates and pillars of democracy — all of which found themselves a shade paler in the era of illumination of the top leader. Democracy will enjoy its good health, its leisurely stroll in the park, watching dissent shoot up through the fountainhead of liberty, while the damaged statue of the superman will only have birds perched on its shoulders for company, singing woefully of the bygone decade, of a thriving autocracy, and its sudden demise.

As a common citizen of the country, we expect the smooth running of the government keeping in view the welfare of each citizen.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
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.

"Personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures."

— F. Scott Fitzgerald

The Shillong Times

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Cartelisation & Clandestine deals

MEGHALAYA'S second name is obfuscation. Opacity has been the hallmark in the distribution of government largesse particularly in awarding contracts. It is only fair therefore for the High Court of Meghalaya to quash the work order given by the Meghalaya Power Generation Corporation Limited (MePGCL) to a certain contractor, stating that the Corporation indulged in 'bid rigging' and cartelization. The MePGCL had on July 4, 2023 floated a tender notice for construction of a multi-purpose indoor stadium at Nongtra Village in Mawsynram worth Rs 2.87 crore. According to the petitioner, the whole process was rigged to favour one party which perhaps had insider information. What is cartelisation? It means a lobby working in cahoots with insiders in the MePDCL. That four tenderers would submit identical rates shows they are a cabal working in tandem to win all contracts by manipulation. The Court has cited procedural impropriety, irrationality, arbitrariness and unreasonableness on the part of the tender committee which had gone beyond its brief to award the contract on a pre-decided party. The Court has rightly stated that there is a serious flaw in the decision-making process and set aside the work order given to one of the parties that is part of the cartel.

This particular case has gained notoriety because one tenderer approached the High Court at the risk of never getting another contract because governments are known to penalise any whistle-blower. The fact is that this is a regular phenomenon in Meghalaya which is the reason for sub-standard construction of roads and buildings. The manner in which contracts for the Medical College in Tura or the Meghalaya State Assembly building and the PA Sangma stadium were awarded are all shrouded in secrecy. Hence the extra-long gestation periods when a contract bid won by a local contractor has to be sub-contracted to another construction firm – naturally from outside the state – because of its expertise, better machinery and technology. No one really follows up on these contracts once they are awarded. The Shillong-Dawki road is one example of a project that was awarded without any transparency. Projects are invariably marred by time and cost overruns and it has been the practice to award escalation costs to contractors. This is also part of the deal where everyone – the PWD minister, the engineers and others down the line benefit. No government in Meghalaya has had the spine to tackle this cartelisation of contract awards and to take on the number of rent-seekers that are growing by the day.

At this rate, can Meghalaya ever develop at the speed that is needed for it to get out of its underdevelopment and poverty syndrome? On the contrary Meghalaya is slipping on critical human development indicators. Sadly, the bureaucracy believes that all is well with the State they are posted to. After all, what can they do when the political system is buried under the weight of corruption. It's a case of – If you cannot beat them; join them.

Letters to the Editor

Double trouble for Mawkhar Church: Where angels fear to tread the vestry

Editor,
It has come to our understanding and notice through a few elders that the special audit, appointed by the church, had brought to light matters relating to the money swindle cases in our church naming certain of its elders and a pastor being involved in the same. It is learnt that the report mentions the double entry of money, the disbursement of funds without any proper bills, the inadequacy of cash bills, the double payments, etc. While appreciating the initiative of the Church Committee to conduct a special audit, it appears that the Committee is hell bent on hiding the truth from the congregation after finding out the leaders' involvement.
It is discouraging and skeptical to see the Church Committee or the Treasurer bestowing complete trust on the ex-chowkidar cum duftu even after they were aware of his mishandling funds and not paying the church's electricity bill payment in 2014 or 2015.
The expenses made for the construction works of the Sohmylleng Mission, amounting to crores of rupees, had been done without any proper bills or invoices

or cash memos. This is done by one of the newly elected church deacons whose qualification (self-claimed) is that of an architect or engineer. Later it was found out that he is a mere vocational trainee from a local institution in Shillong. In such a scenario, where is the Church building Committee (which comprises eminent and reputed engineers and architect members from the church itself)? This clearly shows that the Secretary of the Sohmylleng Mission Committee has by-passed the Church Building Committee and acted unilaterally on most financial transactions.
Also, from the special audit report, it was discovered that the Church had purchased the land at Sohmylleng in 2012 but what surprises us is that this land to this date still belongs to an individual (land owner) and not the person who actually sold the land. Now, my question is who owns the land and the assets in Sohmylleng Mission? Is it the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church or the said individual? This shows how callous and unbothered the Church had been towards the contribution of every hard-earned penny of each member of its congregation towards this Mission because till date there has been no financial report on the Sohmylleng Mission since its inception. Should we therefore, still have confidence in such a failed body of untrustworthy leaders?
This is a request to the Church Committee to take this matter up on a prior-

On June 6, this year, leaders of Democracies in Europe and of North America, gathered together in commemoration of that historic D-Day, June 6, 1944 where so many sacrificed their lives on the bloody beaches of Normandy, France for the sake of Freedom and Democracy. 80 years down the line, on June 4, 2024, 140 crore Indians exhibited to the entire world the results of how they too endorsed their concept of Freedom, Liberty and Democracy. This time through the ballot box. Polling to elect 543 Members to the Lok Sabha started from April 19, 2024, throughout the length and breadth of the country, in seven phases, to end on June 1, 2024. The results of these elections were then declared in a single day on June 4, 2024.

Now regardless of the results of this election, as an Indian I stand proud of the fact that India and its teeming millions were able to accomplish the concept of adult franchise, that too by a majority of a poverty ridden rural electorate, patiently queuing up under a blistering pre-monsoon sun, with such grace, poise and elegance with nary any incidences of violence and bloodshed. Prouder still of the fact that this motley lot of semi-literate voters were able to make the so-called political pundits and their exit poll predictions bite the dust. The people of India proved that they can exercise their own political commonsense with no smart ass urban elite telling them what to do, Thank -You -So- Much. Credit must also be given to the much maligned ECI for the smooth conduct of these elections. It did its job! The polling exercise was a mammoth endeavour and I am proud that we Indians pulled it off with such elan much to the surprise and perhaps envy of other older and also contemporary democracies the world over.

A new Union Govt has now been formed under the Modi 3.0 sarkar. It is a totally different version of the much touted pre-election, 400 par BJP juggernaut promised by the Sangh Parivar and its allies. In the peoples' mandate the BJP barely managed to scrape through to 240

Takeaways from LS Elections 2024

By Toki Blah

The results it produced were astounding. The BJP shockingly and suddenly discovered that they just couldn't form the Govt on their own. The "400 par" boast instantly vanished as hot air from a pricked balloon. A certain BJP "High Level" leader who recently had been tinkering with the idea of divinity for himself, quickly discovered that his feet were actually made of clay and rapidly clambered down from whatever Mount Olympus he had dreamed up for himself. The sad truth had to be accepted. The BJP had to find partners for itself just to form the basic numbers for a new Government. Fond and cherished, pre-poll dreams had to be discarded like soiled underwear and new strategies for survival had to be found and quickly. For many a BJP stalwart, Oliver Goldsmith's play, "She Stoops to Conquer," must have made a lot of sense and to survive they must stoop and accept the reality of a coalition Government. No other way out!

This mixed bag of a new Indian Government at the centre has now been sworn in. Narendra Modi will retain his PM-ship but he will be stepping into uncharted territory. For the last 10 years India had been governed by autocracy. From today onwards consultation, discussions and sounding out coalition partners will become a must. Party ideologies might have to be swept backstage if the Govt is to survive. For a once sure footed autocrat to find himself standing on a slipper carpet that can be jerked from under his feet could be most disorienting. Citizens have done their job! Now they wait with mixed expectations to see if Modi can manage and handle a consultation based coalition! Not many tears however will be shed at the diminished powers of the PMO!

Speaking of expectations we Indians will anxiously be watching the performance of NDA 3.0. A strong democracy also demands a strong and vibrant Opposition. The beauty of this election is that the people of India have been able to

show their understanding of democracy by voting for such an opposition. Governance in the future shall no longer exemplify a runaway horse. The Executive shall be treading on eggshells. It can't just bulldoze its style of governance through Parliament as it did in the last 10 years. Aside from consultations within its own ranks the Government also needs to publicly enunciate its policies for both Home and External affairs. On the domestic front the opposition will keenly be watching on how this Government deals with pressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, inflation and growth of the economy.

On the International stage where India is emerging as a major player, the resurgence of a new World Order; the revival of a new Cold War with all its hazards of a nuclear holocaust; the reshaping of new alliances; the threat of a China with dreams of world domination, the importance of the Indo-Pacific region as a pivot for world peace and global order are challenges that India shall have to address and articulate if it wishes to retain its image as a world power.

As this new Government forges ahead on how to bring growth and development to the country; as we strive to stake claim on the world stage, we have to be clear and lucid on what we want the world to hear and see. Transparency and clarity on both domestic and global issues shall therefore be a prerequisite that shall need both polish and refinement. Policies and intentions can no longer be articulated through placid and lackadaisical Godi media channels nor via rambling discourses of a weekly Mann ki Baat programme (or "monkey baths" as the international press sneeringly calls them) The PM should now be prepared to face the rough and tumble of regular press conferences, however fearsome and intimidating they might appear to be.

Nearer home the Lok Sabha elections brought in electrifying and unexpected results. In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the newly

formed Voice of the People Party (VPP) romped in home with a huge majority over its more established opponents. The "Clean Politics" call of the VPP trampled underfoot with undisguised contempt the customary "money for votes" tactics that Meghalaya politics had for so long depended on. The, "Ha u Prah," chant and song caught the imagination and stirred the emotions of a fatigued electorate that has had its fill of the corruption in the so-called, "High Level," echelons of politics. The counting on June 4, clearly established the fact that the people wanted change, especially change in the mode of governance. The VPP carried the day and their expectations to do the same on the forthcoming KHADC and JHADC elections is justified. It is however hoped that the VPP also comes out with their vision for both the Jaded District Councils, otherwise, they will simply end up as just another regional party out to grab power by whatever means.

In the Garo Hills the voter also expressed his dissatisfaction with the non-performance of its incumbent MP of the NPP. Here too the people's desire for change brought victory to the Congress candidate, Sa leng Sangma. It is therefore prudent to analyse what is this so-called change that the people of Meghalaya are hungry for. It should not be interpreted nor confined as a demand for a change of faces or Parties only. To do so would be betraying the people who have chosen these MPs and the parties they belong to. To me the people thirst for clean governance; for a Government and a system of governance that brings Hope for the future and delivers on its promises to the present; for a system of governance that remains relevant to the needs of the poor and the downtrodden. A change from a governance that feeds the rich and 'High Level' to one that is sensitive to the hunger and cravings of the needy. This is the change the people yearn for.

My only hope is that the powers that be shall not once again let down the simple folks that brought them to power.

Political parties need to do a critical reality check!

By Kittor H. Blah

Political parties in Meghalaya need to take a very serious reality check. Just two or three days before the counting of votes, an interview was done by a local news channel on YouTube where all the leaders of the political parties talked about their own base, and said that no one party will have an easy win. The exception was the spokesperson of the Voice of People Party (VPP), who exuded confidence in a big win from the start.

After the high voter turnout on April 19, even by low or conservative estimates, VPP was always going to cross the 4,00,000 mark easily and it was always going to win by a margin of 1 lakh to 1.5 lakh votes. This was always going to be the case and yet, the leaders of the other parties could not see it or refused to acknowledge it. This was a low estimate, minimising VPP's incursion into the base of Congress and the NPP and assuming that new voters were distributed evenly among the main contenders, and also assuming that the high turnout was equally distributed among dormant voters who never voted in the last Lok Sabha elections and newly registered voters.

But after the results, what we saw was that VPP performed maximally well and exceeded the expectations even of many of its support-

performance of the NDA in Meghalaya, as well as in Mizoram and Nagaland? We cannot blame the Assam CM alone, however shameless his comments were. It was also the Congress leader in Meghalaya himself who used the term 'Christian BJP.'

The intellectuals have nothing to lose for holding to a fictitious narrative, but it has proven very costly for the political parties. Personally, I do not see any substance in that narrative. Is invoking the name of God against secularism? After all, every person is inevitably guided by his value system. My personal view is that there is a modern hyper-sensitivity to anything religious, and this modern Rationalism interprets the word Secular to mean Anti-Religion, which is wrong. So, as soon as the name of God is invoked in any sense, these scholars tend to react hyper-sensitively and unfortunately, equate it with the fanaticism of Hindutva ideology. Unfortunately, the political parties fed off of this narrative and it cost them dearly. The consequences of running an election campaign on these fictitious issues is reflected in the election results. The people did not buy it; it did not resonate with them and hence they voted accordingly. While the VPP was always go-

Looking forward to the next ADC election, there is one simple task for the VPP, and that is, to draw a similar turnout again. If it can do this, it will be an even bigger win in the ADC elections without the non-tribal vote. But what the other political parties should understand and take stock of is that the result of the MP election means that we can no longer have a low or conservative estimate of VPP's vote share in the coming ADC election.

ers including the estimates given by its leaders. So, looking forward to the next ADC election, there is one simple task for the VPP, and that is, to draw a similar turnout again. If it can do this, it will be an even bigger win in the ADC elections without the non-tribal vote. But what the other political parties should understand and take stock of is that the result of the MP election means that we can no longer have a low or conservative estimate of VPP's vote share in the coming ADC election. That ship has sailed. So, even if the turnout in the coming ADC election is reduced by 5 or even 10 per cent, the results would still match the low estimates of VPP's vote share in this MP election, which the other parties did not even acknowledge just days before counting.

So, the only question is, will the VPP still draw a similar turnout in the coming election? Judging by the victory rally on June 8, and judging by social media popularity, there is no reason to believe that it will not. But the other parties have so far refused to associate social media popularity with real life popularity. After the state assembly elections last year, an NPP leader stated that VPP is an East Khasi Hills party that will make no impact in Jaintia Hills. This disconnect with reality among the other parties is so interesting to behold. Of course, the results of this MP election means that they are so far off reality that they need to do a critical reality check and stop politicizing non-issues like lineage or fictitious issues like labelling VPP a Christian BJP. But it is not only the political parties that are focusing on fictitious issues. There were some scholars and intellectuals who were contributing to these fictitious issues, and between them and the parties, there was an echo chamber that disconnected them from the ground reality. Is it any wonder that the Assam CM was emboldened to use that same fiction to justify the dismal

ing to win, following the high turnout, the maximally good performance is also a reflection of the abysmal campaign of the other established parties, whose main issues were lineage and religion. In hindsight, the other parties should see just how abhorrent it was to use these non-issues in their campaign.

But it is also interesting to see that not only did the other parties focus on fictitious issues; they also failed to take real issues seriously such as the issue of CUET. The recent corruption case in the GHADC as well that came under the scanner of the Lokayukta, was not taken seriously. If the question in this election was how much incursion the VPP was going to make into Jaintia Hills, I believe that we can also ask how much incursion is VPP going to make into Garo Hills if the other parties continue to focus on non-issues and fail to take real issues seriously. Of course, the big win by Congress in Tura seat means that the Congress party is still the largest single party in Meghalaya parliamentary politics, with 34% of the vote share, despite its poor performance in Shillong seat. And this will reflect in the ADC elections in Garo Hills as well. But even if the Congress party is the single largest party in Meghalaya parliamentary politics, it is not by a lot, as the VPP follows with a close 33% of the vote share, and that too without any presence in Garo Hills, yet.

So, as we look forward to the next election season - that of the ADCs, I appeal to the intellectuals and the political parties to stop making issues out of non-issues, and to stop creating fictitious issues. The political parties, especially, must take stock of the election results and do a critical reality check, because as it is today, they have completely lost the plot. As for the VPP, if it can draw out the same numbers, then it will create history yet again.

Why an ethno-centric name for a 'State' University?

Editor,
Why should Meghalaya's first State University be named as 'Captain Williamson Sangma State University' and not 'Meghalaya University' to make it truly inclusive? Can legislators from Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Ri Bhoi districts explain? The University is located in Garo Hills so is that not enough that it has to also be named after a Garo leader? Was it a ploy to first pass it in the Legislative Assembly as the 'Captain Williamson Sangma Technical University Act, 2011 and then amended through the 'Captain Williamson Sangma Technical (Amendment) Act, 2023' to make it a State University, replacing the word 'technical' with 'State'? I can't imagine how our elected legislators, all 36 of them, fully endorsed the nomenclature without application of mind. Or perhaps, they were all charmed and outwitted by the Garo friend heading the coalition government of MDA-2. The problem is the name and not the location; the State University can be located anywhere in the State. None of the institutes such as NEHU, IIM, NEIGRIHMS, NIFT, NIT, CAU, etc. bears any State leader's name, be it Khasi or Garo, then why

should the first State University be named as such? It should look inclusive by the very name itself.

Yours etc.,
Prof. Lakhon Kma
Shillong-4

Traffic congestion in Shillong – A student's viewpoint

Editor,
Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I wish to convey my thoughts on the state of traffic flowing through our city roads, or rather, not flowing at all. Traffic jams are now part and parcel of our lives and the honking of horns have become the soundtracks to our everyday existence. The traffic jams are such a big part of our lives that a quiet and peaceful street in the city is the most unusual thing.
As a student now studying at the Higher Secondary level, I have to leave home early to beat the traffic to reach school. But it seems to me that every time, the traffic beats me. This causes a big problem for all of us and especially for the ones living far away.
I do understand that everyone who is stuck in traffic and, thus, makes up traffic are all trying to do the same thing as I, and thus much blame cannot fall on them. But this begs the question, "Who is responsible for the traffic congestion?"

An easy way to answer the question is to blame the government. Yes, the government could do with the widening and maintenance of roads and ensuring proper traffic personnel situated at appropriate and highly congested areas during the rush hours. They could also help by improving the existing transport services to be safer and more consistent. We all will agree that this will immensely help in combating the menace of traffic. But the true blame can only go to the ones behind the wheel and the helmet-donning ninjas, weaving through the lanes. The true blame for all of this falls onto you and me.

The traffic problems of the city eventually boil down to the nature of mankind; the disobedience of the law, the arrogance of not letting another vehicle go past, the making of every possible nook and cranny into a parking spot, the lack of consideration for other people and their time. Only if we grow as a people and go through life with a mindset of co-operation and putting others before ourselves, will the problems of traffic disappear, and that of the society will too.

Yours etc.,
Aaron Mewanlam
Balambok Lyndem
A student of Class XII
St. Edmund's Higher
Secondary School
Via email

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

"If you want to shine like a sun,
first burn like a sun."

— A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

The Shillong Times

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Continuity as mantra

CONTINUITY is the 'mantra' for the third NDA government cobbled together by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi. Major portfolios have been reserved for the second line of leaders in the cabinet. His previous council of ministers too remains largely intact. Admittedly, the seniors in the previous ministry have acquitted themselves well, be it Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Nirmala Sitharaman, Nitin Gadkari or S Jaishankar. They formed the bulwark of the Modi government and will remain so hereafter too. Significantly, neither the Telugu Desam nor the JDU could browbeat the NDA leadership or Modi to give them top portfolios. For now, the regional satraps from Bihar and AP are reconciled to what they got but are more interested in claiming special statuses for their states and wresting development funds. However, considering their past proclivities, they would bide their time. For now what the two have stated is they want larger financial allocations and other support for their states. This perhaps is also to keep a door open for an exit at a suitable time by making unreasonable demands and then ditching the NDA for not "protecting and promoting" their states' interests. That will make them heroes in their states. By all reckoning, Modi kept his composure despite the hit he took this time in terms of the fall in numbers for the BJP in the Lok Sabha.

The unsatisfactory performance of the BJP in the present elections was caused primarily because Modi's popularity took a hit because of the gap between promise and delivery and the hate speeches spewed by Modi during the campaign trail. The other reason is the failure of the BJP leadership in strengthening the organisational heft after Amit Shah handed over the leadership to JP Nadda. He has been 'safely' taken out of that position and given back the health minister's post this time; a ministry that he had handled earlier.

Among the NDA alliance partners, the JDS from Karnataka got the heavy industries ministry, Telugu Desam from AP the Civil Aviation ministry and JDU of Nitish Kumar took panchayats, fisheries etc -- a 'taming of the shrew' effect to those who sought portfolios like Finance or Home for themselves. Neither did Shivraj Singh Chouhan get a plum ministry; He has to remain content with the rural development ministry. Clearly, Modi knows who to keep where to safeguard his own long-term interests. Modi is a status quoist. He's happy with polishing the surface and not keen on an overhaul, as was also amply evident in his style of governance in the past 10 years. This presupposes a sail through placid waters. He does not believe in confronting the system or raising the heat. For this reason alone the wait for a bold overhaul of the antiquated systems in this country is but a pipe dream.

The politics of hunger strikes

By Albert Thyriani

Bindas Syiem, with a firm demand that the government immediately construct the Nongpoh-Umden-Sonapur road, has been on fast for 5 days at least, in the parking lot of the Additional Secretariat. It has become more and more evident that the decision to go for this form of protest was not a solo one. That the 'fast unto death' is devoid of politics does not seem to be true. Whether the Mawlong Nongtluh resident is used by groups or individuals need not be established. What is important to ask is, 'What will the indefinite fast achieve?'

Over two years ago, from May 23 to June 2, 2023, the whole state watched the high profile fast of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) president, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit in the same vicinity. What did the 10 day strike do? It popularised the VPP no end. Through the Anna Hazare style protest spread the fame of the new party in the state, outside the state and even abroad. Lip synchronization of the party's election song 'Kongdeng Kongnah ha u Prah; Bahdeng Bahnah ha u Prah,' by social media performers reached Africa and Europe. The modern media helped VPP to meet the target. It propelled the party, with just four MLAs, to a sensational win of the MP Shillong seat by 3,71,910 votes leaving established parties dumbfounded. The likes of Prestone Tynsong and Rakkam A. Sangma had to sound childish while reacting to the massive victory. So politically the VPP achieved much more than expected.

But that was not the stated aim of the fast. It was to demand for the review and revamp of the state's reservation policy which the VPP had dubbed as outdated. The propaganda was mainly to change allocation of government jobs of 40 per cent each to the Khasi and Garo communities. Basaiawmoit's fast put immense pressure on the Government as crowds threateningly swelled the venue day by day and night by night. The government said 'Yes' to setting up the expert committee to end the fast of the increasingly popular boss of the VPP. More than once the Government had rejected the same demand on the floor of the house but it bent its will to the VPP fearing more damage. After more than a year

what has the Committee done? How many times have members of the Committee met? In its demand, during and prior to the hunger strike days the VPP sounded that the reservation be 'set right' on a fast track mode. But the VPP has gone silent knowing fully well that the sensitive issue cannot be solved according to one's fancy. The VPP seems to have accepted that the 50 plus year old policy cannot possibly be touched. In the meantime the people have been fooled though the VPP has gained immeasurable mileage.

We can also question the merits of the indefinite hunger strike of the then KHAM leader Adelbert Nongrum in 2015 (presently the VPP legislator) over the KHAD (Village Administration) Bill, 2014 and the five-day sit-in-protest in 2022 on his five points charter of demands that included the review of the state reservation policy, the relocation of the Sweepers' Colony and resolution of the long pending Meghalaya- Assam boundary dispute.

Now we address the Bindas Syiem fast! The widow and mother of three had to leave behind her family and children with a placard demanding the overhaul of the dilapidated 45 odd Km road that has caused immense trouble especially for the sick; to travelers who have to suffer aches and pains while traversing the road and those whose vehicles are damaged. The extreme step is the culmination of various protests, memoranda and ultimatums over the neglected road. The fast has taken place because the sweet promises of politicians have come to naught. While on election campaign the PWD minister, Prestone Tynsong termed the road the 'backbone' of the people and assured that the crucial intermediate road would be constructed within a time frame. The present local MLA too gave similar undertakings. Now the blame is on a short duration model code of conduct and various technicalities. Prior to election the promise was 'very soon', post-election the appeal to the public is 'patience'.

In all likelihood the Nongpoh - Umden - Sonapur road will be constructed soon enough. Those demanding

this road will get their wishes. It is good for the people of that part of Ri Bhoi district. They have suffered enough. However pertinent questions need to be raised. Is the Government serious only when it is pushed to a corner? Does the Government construct roads only when someone fasts unto death? One wishes the Nongpoh - Umden - Sonapur residents well but the neighbouring Mawhati-Umsiang road is at least 200% worse than the former. On MP election trail the NPP candidate and minister, Ampareen Lyngdoh, after traveling on the bumpy five kilometre stretch from Assam border to Umsiang, was in tears to woo voters. Now those tears have dried up and she may never venture to that part of the world again. She may rarely travel on similar roads to far flung villages even as Agriculture minister.

Recently, I wanted to travel from Umsiang to Mawhati and then to Umsing. He was told, 'Your vehicle may not reach Mawhati. Even if it does it will land up in the garage.' So he proceeded up to Sonapur and asked people whether I could go up to Nongpoh through Umden. They signalled 'yes'. The road was by no means excellent but my vehicle reached Nongpoh without any hitch. There was no need to visit the garage. So which one is more deserving? Which road should get the priority? Does the Nongpoh - Umden - Sonapur road have more weight because it is associated with the capital, Nongpoh while Mawhati is much less significant merely by location?

The Umsing-Mawhati-Umsiang road was supposed to be a two lane road all through. But the project has reached Mawhati only. The NPP government and the former representative Dasakhia Lamare inaugurated the foundation stone with all fanfare. But from Mawhati to Umsing it is forgotten. Even pick-ups and trucks overturn on the road itself because of the 4/5 feet ditches. The Nongpoh - Umden - Sonapur road may be constructed up to Umden only. The Umden-Sonapur stretch might be left behind for a long time. The periphery is of no importance to this

and past Governments. Then there is petty politics. Since Nongpoh is represented by the UDP, an MDA partner the attention is right there while Mawhati, a Congress seat in the Opposition is given a royal snub. The deputy chief minister himself said, 'those outside the MDA bus won't get water from the Syntex tank.' Mayralborn Syiem, though under fire, is happy because his constituency will improve and will definitely claim credit for it. He may be in line to join the NPP fold before the next elections.

The Government will give a 'convincing' assurance to Bindas Syiem. She and her team will be satisfied. Even a promise to construct the first phase (unto Umden) might do for the protesters. The fast will be called off. The Nongpoh-Umden-Sonapur road will certainly be better. That will be the achievement of the strike. But will it improve the road condition in the rural sector of the state? It is doubtful. The Government has only itself to blame itself. It acts only under pressure and not on a priority basis. The fact that there is no common minimum program even after nearly six years in office speaks volumes. Development takes place haphazardly and not in a planned manner.

Who will fast for the hundreds of roads that are as bad as or even worse than the Nongpoh-Umden-Sonapur road? Even if there are, only a couple of other souls will stand up for the suffering populace. For them the government may complete the executive works. For the rest no one will bother. This is the implication of the Bindas' fast. Unfortunately this is the sorry state of affairs in Meghalaya today.

Way back in 2022, on Republic day, Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma proclaimed that Meghalaya was to be one of India's top 10 states in 10 years. Sangma followed it up with the promise to make the state a \$10-billion economy. He slammed critics who doubted his ambition. Now what has been achieved? People have to fast for a chance to see good roads. Clearly such utterances are but catchy slogans.

The current protest in Shillong has a message: those who are able to set up candidates for indefinite fasts will reap the benefits. Others will be ignored by the powers that be.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Don't Clap for the Slap...!

It was a tight slap on the actress that left its mark! An act that should be condemned, however much we try to justify the reason behind it. It was not done by some angry member of the public but carried out by one in uniform who was supposed to guard and protect citizens.

A guardian of the law, broke the law. But in that slap, law breaking has come full circle.

In the last ten years hoodlums, thugs, ruffians, and rapists have been shown the blind eye. Vigilant mobs have roamed the country, thrashing, assaulting and lynching those who followed another dietary preference to theirs. They've stopped trucks, carrying animals who's taste they did not subscribe to, beaten and killed owners and drivers.

They've looked into homes where women cooked and if their noses smelt smells their own kitchens ne'er produced, they seized those meals meant for the poor and hungry who couldn't afford what these mobsters ate. They mobbed what was once a peaceful nation, rushing into places of worship where citizens worshipped in ways different from theirs, broke walls, burnt sacred objects, like crosses and altars, molested worshippers, thrashed priests, and with jeers and cries of jubilation, went to the next.

They could have raised a riot with what they had just seen; a man, beaten, thrashed, spat upon, and despised by the crowd, being lifted up, proving to every single man and woman, those in power and those who cried, 'Crucify Him!' that He was indeed the Son of God, that indeed all He said and preached in His sermons and discourses were the gospel truth.

They shot journalists dead, point blank, whose writings they cared not for, and scared the rest into silent submission. They added these new 'slap' freedoms to their list of 'breakable laws' pinned to their sleeves. They ran into college campuses, pulled out those who thought different, battered them, whether they wore trousers or skirts. They stopped cars on highways. Raped women travelling in them. They stopped the screening of films whose plot they did not understand. They followed tourists, and if perchance they did not allow a selfie with them, beat them up, groped their women, left them wounded, bloodied and often times dead. "Stop!" shouted their leaders, as the world asked questions. "Stop!" they cried as foreign presidents commented how unsafe the country had become. "Stop, before it is too late!"

But it was too late. Because violence once set free obeys no handler. And when the one in uniform beats their own master or mistress as was this case, then you know that with that resounding slap, violence had come full circle.

But hush! There is a second chance today. The people even as they condemn this slap, also want other slaps to stop; lynching, police brutality, unfair laws, rapes and murders. And other violence created by

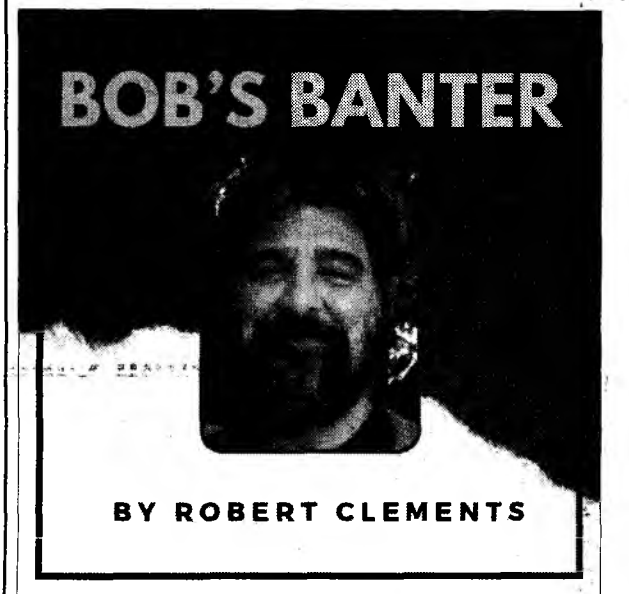
the tongue; jeering, sneering, ridiculing!

Let the slaps stop! Like I said, we have a second chance today, and though the opposition have won a great victory, still it is a time to sow, and not a time to crow.

Though the galvanising of thought and ideas were hugely successful, though the Constitution of the country has been saved, yet it is not a time to crow over one's victory. There were many who dreamt of a Rajya that would be of one religion superseding others. There were many who dreamt of being the first among equals, and their dreams have been gently laid aside by the electorate, but that doesn't mean we who laid such ideas aside, crow over this. This is a time of healing, not of clapping over a slap.

My mind goes to a huge magnificent incident, where witnesses of the event could have gone berserk with jubilation. It was spectacular, glorious, and majestic. It was a slap on the face of the perpetrators of injustice. It put to end every unjust act, every humiliation that the victim had to undergo, a one-sided trial, and a barbaric crucifixion!

The event was the ascension of Christ. He was lifted up into heaven in the presence of five hundred witnesses. Not one, not two, not just his band of disciples but by five hundred men and women!



They separated couples in the name of love jihad, pulling women away from their lawful wedded spouses and murdered those men who dared fall in love with another from another faith.

They marched into hospitals, smashed X ray machines, ransacked operation theatres, threw cancer patients from their wards, thrashed and injured doctors.

They shot journalists dead, point blank, whose writings they cared not for, and scared the rest into silent submission.

They added these new 'slap' freedoms to their list of 'breakable laws' pinned to their sleeves.

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They could have raised a riot with what they had just seen; a man, beaten, thrashed, spat upon, and despised by the crowd, being lifted up, proving to every single man and woman, those in power and those who cried, 'Crucify Him!' that He was indeed the Son of God, that indeed all He said and preached in His sermons and discourses were the gospel truth.

His followers could have gone berserk with victory, but they did not. They did not use the occasion as a time to crow, but used the time as the beginning of a time to sow.

Sow what? Sow love to replace hate. Sow truth to replace falsehood! Sow humility to replace pride and sow forgiveness to replace vengeance!

That's what we need to start doing: In WhatsApp groups that were for Rahul and his allies I see sentiments of revenge and anger and abuse sprouting. In doing so, how different are you from what you fought against?

This is a time to sow love, to sow forgiveness. This is a time to build peace, harmony and sometimes like Gandhiji did, the only time to turn the other cheek at slights and hurtful statements. We need to sow, but the first point about sowing is to empty our baggage of anger and fear. We need to turn our swords into ploughshares. Our daggers into embraces of love.

It's over two thousand years since that Ascension into heaven took place and the sowing has been painful and slow, but that's the pace of love, especially when it has to replace hate.

But, now is the time to sow, not clap over a slap or crow over a defeat..!

Read more in the author's motivational book DARE available on Amazon.in bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Lack of transparency in MPSC results

Editor,
"A lack of transparency results in distrust and a deep sense of insecurity," (The Dalai Lama).
This is the kind of scenario that prevails among the candidates who appeared for various recruitment exams conducted by the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC). The MPSC fails to bring transparency in the declaration of results of various recruitment exams in the following ways:

1. The Commission never discloses the "Official Answer Keys" to the Candidates. Although most of the screening tests or examinations conducted by the MPSC are MCQs (objective type) with Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) Answer sheets, the Commission never releases the answer keys on its website.

2. The Commission never releases the "Cut-off marks" required to pass the exams. The candidates who passed just know that they passed and the candidates who failed just know that they failed based on the display of roll numbers by the MPSC.

3. The Commission never discloses the "marks obtained by the candidates". The failed candidates never know how short their marks are from the cut-off mark. Any candidate who wishes to know his/her marks has to apply for the same to the Commission.

As such, the candidates are kept in the dark. If Central Service Commissions like the UPSC and the SSC and State Service Commissions like the Assam Public Service Commission and others can make available these vital information to the candidates on their websites, then why not the MPSC?

In view of the above, the Commission is expected to take up this matter very seriously and to do the needful so as to ensure transparency, trust and security among the candidates in future examinations

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Drawing wisdom from U Soso Tham and Eliot

Editor,
Michael N. Syiem's letter of appreciation for my book, "Great Minds on India", (ST June 5, 2024), deeply touched me. His viewpoints resonated with many, especially with his apt citation of the revered poet Soso Tham's poem: "knowledge we seek around the world, wisdom of our own we know nothing of." This sentiment struck a deep chord with me, too.

In my early research days, my mind was filled with similar thoughts, especially after plunging deeper into several ancient texts. I discovered a vast difference in the depth of knowledge between the West and the East. Yet, I hesitated to fully

appreciate or criticize this disparity. Amidst this realization and dilemma, T.S. Eliot, a prominent Western intellectual, instilled in me a sense of conviction and courage. Eliot, celebrated as one of the 20th century's greatest poets and a Nobel Laureate, was profoundly "amazed" at the depth of ancient Indian wisdom. In his book "After Strange Gods", he wrote, "Indian philosophers' subtleties make most of the European philosophers look like schoolboys."

Eliot's most widely read poem, "The Waste Land," abounds with echoes of Eastern wisdom. His exploration of life's incompleteness and the "lifegiving waters" flowing through the crack in the rock resonates with Eastern philosophical concepts. This sense of incompleteness aligns with the Eastern doctrines of impermanence, with an emphasis on developing an inner thirst for deeper meanings and striving for higher possibility. Recognizing our own incompleteness and frailties in life fosters a sense of humility, encouraging us to remain open to learning and self-growth. Eliot finally concludes the poem with the Sanskrit words "Shantih shantih shantih," meaning peace in every respect.

Ironically, we Indians habitually look up to the West for knowledge, probably weighed down by a syndrome of inferiority. Such entrenched scepticism usually holds us back from appreciating our wealth of knowledge as also pointed out by Michael Syiem. In contrast, many Western scholars, including leading scientists,

never hesitated to describe the knowledge of the West as "cold, and mean," when compared to the richness of Eastern philosophical wisdom. For instance, a great French philosopher and critic Johann Gottfried Herder noted, "Mankind's origins can be traced to India, where the human mind first shaped wisdom and virtue with simplicity, strength, and sublimity, which has nothing equivalent in our philosophical, cold European world."

Finally, let me wrap up the letter with a serious observation from a Nobel Laureate scientist, Erwin Schrödinger, who wrote in his, 'My World View': "Some blood transfusion from the East to the West is a must to save Western science from spiritual anemia." I don't think the rationalist scientist expressed such thoughts in jest. Our mere groping in the science laboratory and materialistic pursuits can distance us from profound truths and light of reality.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwalni,
Shillong-2

On child labour

Editor,
If we are against child labour and want to observe the World Day Against Child Labour on June 12, then we should unlearn the myth that poverty is to be alleviated first and then only the problem of child labour can be solved. This myth gives moral support to child labour and makes us unsure about how to react to someone who

says that he is doing a great favour to a child's family by employing her/him because otherwise the child would have starved to death but now, the child is having a square meal every day, and some monthly remuneration as well."

An incident happened during my college days when my common sense could not agree with this false idea. But I could not find a counter logic to come out of it.

It was a day when my college friends and I visited an eatery. I found many child workers had been doing the job of waiters, which made me uncomfortable. I asked the owner why he employed so many child workers. Pat came his reply in the form of a question, "Then who'll give these poor children food? Will you?"

This made me very uncomfortable. But I told my friends that I didn't like the argument. It is like giving moral support to nipping a child's potential in the bud. However, I didn't know the answer to the problem.

That somewhat cleared our conscience, and we had our lunch promptly served by a pair of small hands of a child waiter. I asked him his name, and he answered softly, "Bilu", without shifting his focus from the tray full of steaming hot dishes that he had been carrying with utmost care to unload them from one table to another. After giving Bilu a decent tip we headed for a movie.

Then one day, I read in a newspaper Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi's comments on child labour. He said, "Poverty does not

breed child labour, but it is child labour that perpetuates poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and population growth.

Satyarthi's clear ideas helped me find an answer to my own dilemma. I have profound respect for this Nobel laureate who struggled all his life to stop children being exploited as labour instead of attending school.

This got me thinking as to what would have been the outcome if the owner of the eatery didn't employ child workers. I realised that he would not have any other option but to employ adult workers (who could be Bilu's unemployed adult elder brother). Also, he would have had to pay more for those adult workers. So, his engaging Bilu and others was nothing but to extract more profit!

Moreover, if Bilu happened to become "unemployed", his parents might, in all probability, send him to a school to at least get a midday meal!

Kailash Satyarthi has broken a long-standing myth that gives child labour less importance than poverty. The truth is - child labour is one of the reasons for poverty and unemployment. As a matter of fact, every child's entry into the job market actually closes the job opportunity of an adult.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"The strongest principle of growth lies in the human choice."

— George Eliot

The Shillong Times

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Need to Strengthen Community Policing

MEGHALAYA is a transit route for drugs coming in from the Manipur and Mizoram route via Silchar. It is no secret that the State now has a growing number of substance abusers including injecting drug users as is evident from the syringes carelessly thrown around at various places. Disenchanted young people with no roadmap for the future tend to resort to drug use and before long they are addicted beyond redemption. What is also a matter of concern is that the number of detoxification and rehabilitation centres are very few compared to the number of people needing help. There is the Meghalaya Institute Mental Health and Neurological Sciences (MIMHANS) in Shillong and the SANKER Nursing home — the first rehabilitation centre for alcoholics and drug abusers as well as people with mental health problems. There are other rehabilitation centres in the districts but they are unable to deal with the burgeoning problems.

There is an urgent need to reduce the influx of drugs but to expect the police alone to do it is futile. The police have their hands full tackling crime related to drug use which is a string of thefts occurring in every locality of Shillong. It is common to find petty thieves cutting down electrical wires and cables so they can sell the copper to meet their craving for drugs. There are home break-ins and stealing of other public utilities too. For an addict not getting his/her fix results in severe withdrawal symptoms that pushes the person to do desperate deeds just so he/she can get the next fix. The recent conclave on substance abuse organised by the Social Welfare Department pointed to the need for pro-active participation of the Dorbar Shnong to prevent the spread of drug use through vigilance within the shnong but to also provide rehabilitation centres. Dealing with addicts to substance abuse is a gruelling task. It involves psychiatric treatment where the entire family must necessarily participate and is a long and arduous journey.

Community policing and vigilance alone can reduce substance abuse and crime as well. There were times when community policing was part and parcel of policing in Meghalaya. It inherently means citizens assisting the police in their duties. But so much depended on the police chiefs and their interest in involving the public. Some have done well; others have neglected this aspect. The basic principle underlying community policing is that a policeman is a citizen in uniform and a citizen is a policeman without the uniform. The point is to narrow the gap between the police and citizens to the point that the police become an integrated part of the community. The principle is to build a bond with the community so that citizens themselves become vigilant reporters of crime. There has always been a deep trust deficit between the police and citizens for several reasons. It is important to reduce this gap and build trust so that there is better maintenance of public order through better crime detection and prevention.

A WIN Without a Victory

By Roshmi Goswami

The first call I get as the Election results rolled in and the manipulated exit polls of the Godi media kicked out was from Manipur. It was Hamid the trusted and dependable Pangal taxi driver who has been a constant support and witness to the many challenges of negotiating travels through the buffer zones of his strife torn state during my numerous travels there in the last one year. He called to share his joy with someone who he felt would be equally ecstatic about the Manipur results plus talk about the all India scenario and his aspirations. The victory for people like Hamid and millions like him across the length and breadth of the nation is indeed a very personal one for this Election like none other was truly believed an individual who had elevated himself to an invincible 'celestial' being versus the People of India. And while large numbers of the urban educated middle class remained entrenched and slothful in the oblivion of opportunism or the comfortable corporate bubble of 'designer thinking' and designer lifestyles the 'people' — largely the working class rural janata exercised the power of their one vote to uphold the Indian constitution and draw Indian Democracy back from the brink of the precipice.

The contribution of thousands of common people mostly young men and women who came forward as community influencers, organizers, social media activists and volunteers was invaluable in this process of mobilisation. Being part of the Bharat Jodo Abhiyan (BJA) platform one came in close contact with many of these committed workers silently strategising and giving their all behind the scenes including my two comrades during the Yatra in Manipur — two young professionals from Mumbai and Hyderabad who opted to put their careers and earnings on hold and instead volunteer time for the country. Finally as BJA one witnessed closely the leadership, vision and encouragement that Yogendra Yadav provided to veteran as well as young activists across the country. Altogether an extremely humbling experience different from all other civil society engagement that one has been a part of.

In the struggle to uphold Indian democracy the challenges to the process of mobilisation for both civil society platforms as well the political Opposition were almost insurmountable. Everything was stacked against the Opposition and the people — money, muscle, the entire

administrative machinery, an obsequious and totally partisan media, corporate patronage, a blatantly regime indulgent Election Commission and in many instances arrests and detentions under flimsy and trivial charges. Yet people persisted and triumphed and as the glittering jewel in the crown of Hindutva fell in Ayodhya almost retributively to a Dalit leader, the people of India gave the ruling regime a resounding message — a win without a sense of victory! As Yogendra Yadav tellingly put it — "Mr. Modi might have managed the numbers but he lost the iqbal!"

A sense of people's triumph was palpable at the launch of the Bharat Jodo Nyaya Yatra at a private ground in the Khongjom area of Thoubal district in Manipur on the January 14, 2023. In a bull-headed display of lack of graciousness and political professionalism typical of the ruling regime, permission to flag off the Yatra from the Hapta Kangjeibung grounds of Imphal was denied at the last minute by Biren Singh's government by imposing impossible conditions. Days later much to the profound shame of Assam similar but even crasser obstructions accompanied by crude verbal assaults by the State functionaries ensued as the Yatra travelled through Assam. A slur on the reputation of Assam deeply felt by sections of us Assamese brought up with the age-old ethos of all-ways extending impeccable hospitality towards any guest even an enemy by ensuring that the biggest seat or 'bor pirah' is offered to the visitor. The only saving grace was a statement that 100 plus of us — public intellectuals, academics, artists, musicians, writers, church leaders brought out was graciously received and appreciated by the visitors. Nagaland on the other hand despite being a BJP or BJP indebted state retained its individuality and traditional Naga dignity. The Nagas gracefully received and enabled Rahul Gandhi and the Bharat Jodo Nyaya Yatra through the state with typical Naga hospitality and distinctive tribal ethos.

In violence scarred Manipur thousands converged that afternoon at the Khongjom grounds in Thoubal seeking reassurance from a national leader — hoping for Hope and for a hopeful way out of the impasse. As the numbers swelled one could see that pushing the Yatra out of Imphal had clearly boomeranged on Biren Singh

for participation in Thoubal also a strong Congress base, exceeded all expectations. As people waited for Rahul Gandhi's delayed flight to arrive and as we listened to the diverse array of powerful speakers on stage there was something which was refreshingly uplifting. The energy generated in Thoubal was infectious and carried late into the evening to the civil society interactions with Rahul Gandhi (RG) at the Yatra's night halt in Sekmai. I also carried with me a memorandum written in Meitei Lon from the 'warrior women' of Thoubal to be handed over personally to Rahul Gandhi! In the last one year I have been interacting closely with these 'warrior women' — calling them out on the violence committed by their community but also listening to them. Strong, powerful, wise women deeply reflective and politically astute. During one of our interactions one of them had reflectively announced — "To solve the complex problem of Manipur layers of analysis and a sharp mind is required plus a deep sense of responsibility. None of the present leaders of today have these qualities!" We were all surprised and impressed by the contents and tone of the memorandum which was translated and read out to RG by a respected veteran journalist of the state. Among others the women asked whether RG would be open to a discussion and engagement on the unresolved questions around the statehood of Manipur. The rest of the interaction with the select group of civil society members not aligned to any political group was also very intense and complex. Despite the fact that some of the members had serious clashes with the Congress in the past there was no angst and the discussions were carried through with a high level of political maturity, insightfulness and congeniality. The participation of three local journalists was especially useful.

The same level of openness continued the next day as the Yatra moved into Kangpokpi district. An interaction with a group of civil society members predominantly women was scheduled. In the end it was only the women who came. Four young Kuki women with whom I have had a year long close association boarded the bus in Motbung and in the short drive to Kangpokpi had the most personal, candid and substantive meeting with Rahul Gandhi.

The politically sharp and articulate young women were able to talk not just about the violations but their own deep fears and insecurities and also lay out the entire gamut of accompanying issues that affected their community due to the near total concentration of power, facilities and infrastructure in the valley and the implications thereof given the divide. The interaction was understandably emotional as the women were overwhelmed that a national leader was giving them this personal and precious time.

Kangpokpi has been one of the worst affected districts reporting the maximum number of brutal violations. The women presented the facts with firmness and complete honesty but with the quiet dignity typical of this region. There were thousands of people on both sides of the highway cheering or calling out and every now and then RG would just jump off the bus throwing security concerns and restrictions to the wind and be with the people — just to hold their hands, listen to them, show basic human empathy or pay respect at the Wall of Remembrance which meant the world to families whose loved ones were now pictures on that wall. This is the empathy that the hurting and grieving people had waited for from the Prime Minister but never got. Thousands of people also waited at the Kangpokpi grounds to listen to RG at the proposed public meeting. But yet again in deference to her rulers in Delhi and without any concern for the sentiments of her own traumatised community, the will of Nemcha Kipgen the local BJP MLA prevailed and permission was denied for the public meeting.

The Manipur election results clearly tell us that on both sides of the divide people understood that there was no state left, the government had completely collapsed, and people were just left to their own devices including to defend themselves. They saw too through the divisive and mercenary agenda of the BJP, the sheer callousness and complete disregard for people. So the people across the seemingly irreconcilable divide united mentally to make a clear political choice. A political choice which definitely has significant implications for the entire NE region. Together with the dramatic and welcome changes in Nagaland, Meghalaya and Assam especially Jorhat, the process of de-saffronisation of the region has perhaps just been initiated.

PM Modi cannot even think of equalling Nehru's achievements India's first PM turned a colonialism-ravaged land into a worthy nation

By Devasis Chattopadhyay

Narendra Damodardas Modi became the Prime Minister of India for the third term on June 9, 2024 and equalled Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure, statistically. However, did he earn the respect of the citizens of India that was equivalent to what Nehru had earned?

Since the time Modi took over as the Prime Minister of India in 2014, the atmosphere has been vitiated by hate and unbridled administrative excesses. As the Prime Minister of the country, he has been constantly

he lacks empathy towards fellow Indians.

Sixty years after his death, the father of modern India, Jawaharlal Nehru, remains the main target of the present Prime Minister, who has just secured a third term in office. For Modi, Nehru is a recurrent target to attack. Not just because he believes Nehru cast India in his distorted image but also to chip away at the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty and the Indian National Congress, his main and arch-rivals.

But, is that all there is to

"The social, economic, and political factors surrounding India under Nehru were completely different. He had to create the fundamentals of the newly Independent India so that the likes of Narendra Modi could come and boast of statistically matching his tenure but not intellectually. That's the irony."

deficient in compassion, the mark of a leader, people feel. Instead, he always remained a politician from the far-right political party with a very narrow organizational agenda.

Modi's Nehru fixation? One thing we know about Narendra Modi is that he is never driven by any sentiment, or wastes his time reviving old debates for sheer intellectual and political pleasure.



Yes, Pandit Nehru was a politician too. No doubt about that. Yet, he worked for the greater good of Indians. His tenure began when our country became independent after being under British rule and occupation for 190 years (1757-1947),

His compulsion is possibly somewhere else.

Which brings us to the real issue. If we analyze carefully, since 2014 Modi rarely attacked other members of the Nehru-Gandhi family. He deliberately ignores Rajiv Gandhi as if he

"If we analyze carefully, since 2014 Modi rarely attacked other members of the Nehru-Gandhi family. He deliberately ignores Rajiv Gandhi as if he never existed. Significantly, he has been very careful not to attack Indra Gandhi directly. He does invoke the excesses caused during the Emergency period often but is careful not to mention Mrs. Gandhi, in the same sentence."

when a predominantly agrarian economy was facing the waves of industrialization, and when the entire world was just coming out of the devastation caused by World War II.

The social, economic, and political factors surrounding India under Nehru were completely different. He had to create the fundamentals of the newly Independent India so that the likes of Narendra Modi could come and boast of statistically matching his tenure but not intellectually. That's the irony.

Pandit Nehru took over a country that was considered 'Third-World', economically challenged. He laid the foundation of her socio-economic growth brick by brick. On the contrary, we can argue that Prime Minister Modi's efforts towards reforms of the educational systems, inclusiveness among the people of India, the generation of employment, and empowerment of the Non-Brahmins and Non-Kshatriyas since 2014 have been far from satisfactory. Experts and civil society argue that his policy decisions related to the Indian economy reeks of crony capitalism. And many of the citizens even feel that

never existed. Significantly, he has been very careful not to attack Indra Gandhi directly. He does invoke the excesses caused during the Emergency period often but is careful not to mention Mrs. Gandhi, in the same sentence. Moreover, he tries during every opportune moment to appropriate Sardar Patel and Lal Bahadur Shastri as well.

However, in Modi's logic, he probably feels that Rahul Gandhi draws major strength from the Nehruvian lineage, philosophy, era, and dignity. And, he considers Rahul Gandhi his main political threat in our national politics, even though he may not openly acknowledge it. As such, he uses all his rhetorical skills to portray Rahul Gandhi in a bad light, as naive and incompetent and tries belittling his great-grandfather. As a result, since 2014, Narendra Modi's BJP unleashed its band of vicious trolls on the young man as well, to destroy his dignity.

And, there-in lies the deficiency of Prime Minister Modi to be equal to Pandit Nehru. IPA

Devasis Chattopadhyay is a Reputation Strategist, a Columnist and a Writer.

Letters to the Editor

Shillong's traffic woes: A call for action

Editor, I am writing to express my deep concern about the ever-worsening traffic congestion in Shillong. It is a daily ordeal for residents to navigate the city, with commutes between Laitumkhrak and Police Bazar, a mere 20-minute walk, stretching into a frustrating 1.5 to 2 hour crawl. This is simply unacceptable.

For years, we have been subjected to this gridlock, with little to no respite. The government's repeated promises of solutions ring hollow when faced with the reality on the ground. It's time for concrete action, not empty pronouncements.

The causes of this congestion are multifaceted: narrow, outdated roads, haphazard parking, and an ever-increasing number of vehicles. We need a comprehensive strategy that tackles these issues head-on.

The people of Shillong deserve better. We deserve a city where commutes are efficient, not excruciating. I urge the authorities to take immediate and decisive action to formulate a solution that will alleviate traffic congestion and make Shillong a more liveable city for all.

Yours etc.,
Pratham K Sharma
Via email

Why wash dirty linen in public?

Editor, Apropos of the letter, "Double trouble for Mawkhar Church: Where angels fear to tread the vestry," by an anonymous writer I would like to express my deep sense of sadness, anguish, and disappointment at the way the writer has chosen to express his/her grievances regarding the church, its functioning and allegedly against a few leaders of the church. Although the writer has chosen to remain anonymous, it was, however, not difficult to decipher that the writer is a single person and not a group as he/she was trying to portray. Why I say so, is because, in the fourth paragraph of the letter, the writer says, "Now my question is who owns the land and the assets in Sohmylleng Mission?" This gave away the singularity of the individual concerned and clearly shows that it is not a group of individuals but rather a single person. Nonetheless, that is not the point. The point that I would like to convey is that it appears that the person concerned is not any ordinary church member but someone privy to all the checks and balances, the minutes, and everything behind closed doors.

As a congregant myself, I am deeply saddened by

the way this person chooses to address the issue — by washing dirty linen in public and hiding behind the veil of anonymity. I strongly believe that this individual does not represent the entire congregation, and as a congregation, we do not condone or encourage such practices. Well! at least that is what I think and that is my stance. I would also, through this medium, humbly request any individual or group who is disappointed with the church or its leaders, their style of functioning, or their corrupt practices (albeit until now unproven and unbeknownst to the congregants) to kindly take their concerns and vent their frustrations and anger within. Let us confront directly as (sane) men to clean the church of any corrupt or unwanted practices and not trumpet our family affairs to men who may not understand us and take undue mileage of our misery.

Yours etc.,
A. Dkhar
Shillong-2

Rahul Gandhi should accept post of Opposition Leader

Editor, For the last two consecutive Parliament sessions there was no Leader of Opposition (LoP) in the Lok

Sabha as no party including the Congress party won 55 members which is the minimum requirement to get this post but now Congress has won 99 seats members in the Lok Sabha so the Party has requested Rahul Gandhi to become the LoP in the Lok Sabha. However Rahul Gandhi has said that he wants some time to decide on this issue. If Rahul Gandhi agrees it will be a good step in national interest as the country had seen how the Bills were passed without any discussion and also without referring to the Privileges Committee, which is also known as the mini Parliament

Despite all the snide remarks amounting to online bullying Rahul Gandhi did not allow himself to become bitter, angry, smug and spiteful unlike Prime Minister, Narendra Modi who too was subjected to vicious attacks, on justified grounds, for the Gujarat riots on his watch as chief minister. Instead, Gandhi reached out to the people of India to emphatically push his idea of an inclusive, diverse, equitable and constitutionally-driven country; the two strenuous Bharat Jodo Yatras are evidence of his willingness to be physically tested and be comfortable with the common Indian. His accommodation with allies in the INDIA bloc shows a new maturity too.

In his renewed avatar, Rahul Gandhi has had support from — besides his fam-

ily — Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge who has been content to allow him to be the party's star. He articulates, even today, the polar opposite of the RSS' idea of India. While Gandhi's new acceptability is welcome, the road ahead is challenging. Upping the ante in the Parliament, smart and tactical alliances, allowing space for allies while expanding the Congress, listening to varied voices on issues, rebuilding the party's organisation, and so on are what Congress should think of. For a start, he will have to decide between his two seats, Wayanad and Raebareli, but that seems a small decision for a politician who seems to have — finally — come of age.

It was the moment to cherish for Rahul Gandhi when the Congress got enough seats to dictate its own terms within the INDIA bloc. This will enable the Congress to implement policies which were not possible previously and in Parliament the Congress will have enough time to put forth its ideas.

Senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor hailed Rahul Gandhi as "the man of the match" of the Lok Sabha polls and said it would only be fitting that he takes on the mantle of the Leader of Opposition in the house.

It is also seen that Rahul Gandhi as well as some other Congress leaders have the habit of issuing such statements which could ul-

timately harm the Party. Spokespersons must speak after due consultations.

The Congress should also clarify its stance to partners in the INDIA bloc because AAP has stated that the alliance was only for the Lok Sabha elections and not beyond. Every citizen of the country will be keenly watching the healthy parliamentary debates in the 18th Parliament. Issues raised in Parliament should carry a strong message that matters are of national importance. Now Rahul had raised the demand of a Joint Parliamentary Committee to interrogate into the huge fluctuations in share market just two days before the results and based on exit polls. Unfortunately, the TMC is against the JPC demand saying that it is mere waste of time and serves no purpose. When there are conflicting views within the Alliance the Congress party has to deal with them in a mature and sensitive way.

Let us hope that what happens henceforth will be in the larger interest and progress of the country and to strengthen democratic values.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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"The weak in courage is strong in cunning."

— William Blake

The Shillong Times

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Merit and Modi 3.0

WITH the full contingent of ministers being assembled for the Modi-3 show marking a third consecutive term for the National Democratic Alliance government, the difference this time, both in character and content, is significantly less but certain aspects stand out. Addition of talent is what draws special attention in ministry formations, but nothing goes to show such an attempt was made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi this time. While Modi's word is final in the BJP, the influence of the RSS and Sangh Parivar on the party and its government cannot be wished away. Without the solid backing from the RSS or Sangh Parivar, BJP as a political party cannot carry clout even ten years after the Modi-led rule by the party and its allies. Clearly, RSS thinking gets reflected in ministry-formation, be it in the past, present or future. In fact, all top level appointments have an RSS stamp. The PMO itself is swamped by Sangh Parivar think-tanks, just as a seasoned and well-heeled Kashmiri Pandit lobby was active behind the Congress establishment in the past.

While the second line of Modi in the central government comprised strong leaders, the overall complexion of the three ministries since 2014 is such that there has been a deficit of talent. Nirmala Sitharaman, or Arun Jaitley, were not economists of repute as Manmohan Singh was. Yet, Sitharaman managed the ministry without any serious problems or complications. The external affairs ministry has a former diplomat and foreign affairs specialist in the form of S Jaishankar. The handling of the education ministry by Dharmendra Pradhan might enthrust the RSS, not the nation. An IT expert like Rajeev Chandrasekhar is now out. Those heading most ministries are of average capability and it showed in their performance. There is nothing to show that this term of the NDA would be more impressive.

While the BJP-NDA introduced a law giving one-third reservation for women in legislative bodies including the Lok Sabha and preened the party's feathers with this claim, the present Modi government has no more than seven women out of the total 72 ministers. A senior minister like Smriti Irani is out, and so are Sadhvi Niranjan Jyoti, Meenakshi Lekhi etc. Worse, there is no Muslim representation. Women form half the population of the nation and Muslims over 15 per cent – the largest concentration compared to any other country. In Modi's last term, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi and previously MJ Akbar were part of the ministry. Not all Muslims are anti-BJP. Christians forming two per cent of the population have from their ranks a Minister of State in the form of George Kurien from Kerala. The North-East is under-represented. In other words, this is not an inclusive government. A representative form of governance is far from what we see today.

Parliament not a place for lone wolves

By Patricia Mukhim

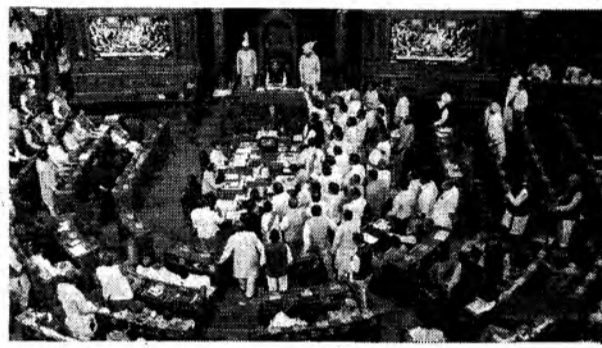
This news in Firstpost, one of the leading news portals on June 7 last wrote this news captioned "Who are Lok Sabha's 7 Independent MPs? Are they with NDA or INDI Alliance. I read this news with interest hoping to see the name of our newly elected MP, Dr Ricky Syngkon as one among the 7 but it did not feature there. The 7 Independent MPs mentioned were Vishal Patil who contested from the Sangli seat in Maharashtra, Amritpal Singh from the Khadoor seat in Punjab, Sheikh Abdul Rashid from the Baramulla seat in Jammu & Kashmir, Rajesh Ranjan alias Pappu Yadav who won from Purnea in Bihar, Mohammed Hanifa from Ladakh, Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa from Faridkot, Punjab, Patel Umeshbhai Babubhai from Daman and Diu. Not one of the 7 independent MPs said they would support the NDA. Nearly all of them barring Sarabjeet Singh have said they would be with the INDI Alliance.

It was therefore surprising to note that the VPP stance is not to align either with the NDA or the Opposition INDI Alliance. The second group is a coalition of 26 political parties. Their main agenda at the time of their formation was to defeat the BJP and its exclusivist agenda in 2024, to protect the Constitution, to promote inclusive development and above all to uphold the secular values of India. One would have thought that the lone VPP MP would align with forces that believe in the intrinsic values of the Indian Constitution – in particular the idea and practice of secularism where people of all religions are given equal respect. The NDA had in its previous tenures reduced the margins of freedom that Indians had taken for granted during the Congress rule and even during the tenure of AB Vajpayee as Prime Minister. Since 2014, when Narendra Modi took over the reins of this country we have seen India our freedoms shrinking and the media being pushed to the wall. Some in the media took the easy way out and compromised on the most cherished ideals of what used to be known as "free and fair" journalism. They

became the handmaidens of the BJP-NDA. Prime Minister Modi got away with not having a single press conference in 10 years of his governance.

It would have been in Meghalaya's interests for both its MPs to speak with one voice. Parliament is not a place for lone wolves. To consider oneself so independent as to not need a lobby group is to be overconfident and supercilious. But perhaps the VPP feels

Covid struck which caused severe hardships for many migrant workers. Those who suffered on account of those impulsive decisions could not have forgotten them so soon. So too those who could not find a bed in hospitals or oxygen tanks when their family members needed them. I am sure all those nightmarish decisions have had an impact in reducing the BJP's seats in 2024. It is the height of arrogance for any party to forget those narrow-



it cannot work in tandem with the Garo MP since the Party is on a collision course with the Garos on the State Reservation Policy. But can that agenda not be left to the legislators here while the MP works towards achieving the higher goals of nation building and of defending the constitutional rights of the minorities whether because of their tribal status or the religion they profess.

I don't think Dr Syngkon needs any education on what the role of the Opposition in Parliament is. Since Prime Minister Modi has short-circuited one of the pillars of democracy – the free press – now it becomes even more incumbent for the Opposition to question the NDA Government and hold it accountable to the public. This helps to fix the mistakes of the Ruling Party. The Opposition is as much responsible in upholding the best interests of the people of the country and the respective states they represent. They have to keep the Government on its toes to ensure that it does not pass any policy that is anti-people or take sudden unilateral and arbitrary decisions such as demonetisation or even the sudden lockdown when

ing incidents of 2020-2021. Some have never recovered from the trauma and never got back their jobs.

Of course the Opposition cannot be totally antagonistic to every policy proposed to be passed if such policy is in public interest. But we know how many Bills were actually passed without any discussion and deliberation even while Opposition MPs were railroaded in the just concluded Lok Sabha. Opposition members were arbitrarily dismissed by the Speaker on some pretext or other and the Bills were thus passed. The Opposition is basically to check the excesses of the ruling or dominant party, which the BJP was in the last Parliament.

Considering that there are 4 types of majorities used in Parliament – Absolute, Effective, Simple, and Special Majority it is important to be with a group that votes for the right causes in each of the above voting patterns. There is not enough space here to explain the different types of majorities used for different bills but a reading of the Constitution would inform us why it is important to be present and voting and not to allow the Government to

bulldoze its way through by passing important bills with far reaching consequences without discussion. There has been much loose talk before the 2024 elections that if the BJP crosses the 400 seat mark (char sau paar) it had set for itself then the Party would inevitably tinker with the Constitution and bring in facets that would make India a nation as envisaged by the saffron party. It would tune the Constitution to support one language, one religion, one election and a uniform civil code while also implementing the CAA in right earnest. Thankfully the voters rejected this wild ambition.

It is in this very important juncture of our history when democracy needs to be given a fresh lease of life and all the ugliness of an oppressive regime must slowly but surely be weeded out that the people of Meghalaya send their two MPs to Parliament. The people refused to vote for the NPP which had a pre-poll alliance with the BJP. They voted with the hope that the cruelties inflicted on the likes of Fr Stan Swamy would not be repeated. True public memory is short and nothing can be worse than that. But if we let such sordid memories slip past without renewing our commitment to vote democracy back then we are forgetting something important.

One hopes the VPP comes off its high horse and learns to work in tandem with other like-minded political parties. There's much to learn from more experienced MPs and to stand together on crucial issues affecting the country. Politics as played in the state with political egotism playing spoilsport cannot be the same at the national level. Here what is required is political maturity and more statesmanship than petty politicking. The people of Shillong Parliamentary Constituency had given the VPP a resounding victory. Let this mandate be used to meet the peoples' aspirations and not to score political goals. We are a small state and we should matter in the way that our MPs represent us in Parliament.

An agenda for the new coalition government

By G.N. Bajpai

The results of the Parliamentary elections-2024 have unfolded quite a surprise. The economic pain, deficiency of employment opportunities and threat to the democratic order, with the narrative of amending the constitution inter alia seem to have influenced the results significantly, particularly in rural areas. The Indian voters do care about democracy in addition to economic well being. This is a positive development.

The new government, now a coalition, under the leadership of Narendra Modi has been sworn in. The agenda of the new government is being watched carefully.

I recall my pilgrimage to the national memorial of the three-storied Cellular Jail in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the site of inhumane atrocities heaped on India's freedom fighters by the British. One inscription of the inmates written to his fellow villagers as he awaited execution, reads: "... I have done my part and now it is your turn." It is our duty to work together to emancipate India from economic deprivation and misery, and usher in an era of prosperity.

The new five year-term of Modi 3.0, as this tenure has come to be called, should not lose sight of key messages like seeing India as a fully developed society and in fighting corruption at all levels. The message of the freedom fighters would ring true only if India's development reaches the last mile, the weakest and the poorest. This is possible in material terms only with a minimum annual average real GDP growth rate of 7% plus for the next two decades, a task easier said than done. In traditional literature, GDP growth is predominantly influenced by the availability and productivity of three factors of production – land, labour, and capital. The current geo-political backdrop and broader global economic environs necessitate coordinated mobilisation, sagacious deployment and optimal sweating of all three factors.

How do we achieve that? Wide ranging reforms are called for in all three areas. Whereas the capital efficiency of India compares favourably with most countries, the productivity of labour lags considerably. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) in the matter of labour efficiency, ranked India at 126 in 2022, based on 2017 Purchasing Power Parity (PPP).

The acquisition of land post the related legislation (The Land Acquisition Act, 2013) passed during the Manmohan Singh government requires compulsory approval of 80% of the community for use by private companies and Public Private Partnerships (PPP). Along with the right to fair compensation, purchase of land has become impassable and uneconomic. The availability of land has thus become a serious impediment to infrastructure building and industrialisation. Yet, land acquisition has often been negative, as witnessed in the manner in which parts of or whole shops and houses were reportedly demolished in Ayodhya. This is believed to have contributed to the BJP losing the Faizabad seat in this election. We will need a more humane way of acquiring land, with greater governance in terms of standards, fairness, rights of people and a commitment to return the value to the local area.

Agriculture sector efficiency is another drag in stepping up the GDP growth rate. If the agriculture sector had contributed in tandem with other sectors like manufacturing and construction, the 2024 GDP growth rate would have exceeded 10%. The rural masses depend on agricultural income, in the absence of which economic gains bypass them even in the high GDP growth era. Needless to say, land, labour and agriculture are emotive issues. In a vibrant multiparty democracy of India, building political consensus on emotive issues

is a prolonged battle that requires inexhaustible patience and accommodation of a rainbow of interests and ideas. It is understood that when the Nagaland government under the leadership of R.S. Pandey, the then Chief Secretary with full blessings of the Chief Minister, introduced 'communitisation' of health, education and power, it waded through an arduous seven steps of architecting concurrence amongst various stakeholders ranging from leaders of communities, political parties, media to authorities in the institutional framework. The endeavour was recognised even by the United Nations.

In 2017, the government tried to build (which several governments in the past could not) national consensus on the implementation of the 'Unified Tax Regime' - GST through a prolonged, rigorous exercise. The then Finance Secretary had in a business dinner revealed to a group of six at his table how the game of understanding and patience was played by the national leadership. Yet, we must recognise that GST was and remains a bone of contention.

The national intent of 'Developed India by 2047' should be like a 'Mahavygya' of economic emancipation. The message of freedom fighters and economic well-being of the voters should inspire leaders of all political colours to cooperate wholeheartedly in building consensus leaving narrow, sectarian interests behind.

In the matter of ease of doing business, the real thorn is the enforcement of the contract. It takes an average of 1,445 days to enforce a contract and costs over 31.3% of the claim value leaving people tired of judicial inefficacies. The institution of the judiciary calls for wide ranging reforms. Further, delay will culminate in a loss of faith in the system itself. Here too consensus for transformation must be built amongst various stakeholders viz. judges, lawyers, politicians and civic society.

There is growing concern about rising economic inequality. In India, inequality is of two kinds: (a) between rich & poor and (b) between States. As per the 'Income & Wealth Inequality Report in India 2024' authored by Nitin Kumar Bharti, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty and Anmol Somanchi inequality declined post-independence till the early 1980s but has skyrocketed since 2000. Apparently, high GDP growth rates did not bring cheer to the poor. The economic disparities emanate from a lack of 'equal opportunity'. The constitution of India in its preamble guarantees inter alia 'equality of status and of opportunities'. The civic administration charged with the responsibility of execution of policies operates at a minimum efficiency level, which spells frustration especially amongst the deprived. The steel frame designed to run a subjugated nation must undergo comprehensive reengineering.

Further, there is a sharp gap in per capita NSDP (Net State Domestic Product) among States. In 2022-23 NSDP per capita of Goa on nominal prices was Rs.5,32,854 and that of Bihar Rs.54,111. UP and Odisha were Rs.83,664 and Rs.1,45,202 respectively. Even between Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, which were one State not long ago, there is a gap of over Rs. 90,000. This disparity, which is the consequence of lopsided economic development must be remedied. The allocation of additional resources, building trust amongst investors and modelling execution capabilities should be in sharp focus.

(The writer is the former Chairman of SEBI & LIC, and is the author of the book 'A Game Changer's Memoir'. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Decline of quality education in Shillong

Editor,
Over-commercialization of the education sector cultivates a degenerating competitive environment, where organizations prioritize revenue-generating programs over educational value and profit over educational quality, often with the covert goal of eliminating less financially robust yet academically rigorous institutions. Many societies experience this phenomenon during transition to capitalism. Shillong city, once regarded as an educational hub of North-East India, has in recent years witnessed a concerning trend where a few so-called "elite colleges" prioritize their brand reputation over teaching quality, luring students with their name and fame, resulting in overcrowded classrooms with hundreds of students.

While enrolling an excessively large number of students, these colleges ignore the ethical guidelines for maintaining an optimum student-teacher ratio to ensure effective teaching and learning, disregarding the standards set by regulatory bodies like UGC, AICTE, and guidelines of the affiliating University. How can quality teaching and learning be ensured when there are over a hundred students seated in a classroom? The affiliating university, NEHU, has guidelines for its affiliated colleges to limit the intake of students per shift, per honours paper subject to a maximum of

50 students. However, these colleges often enrol over a thousand students per honours paper, possibly divided into four shifts a day. The University authorities seem overwhelmed by the brand reputation of the colleges, as they do not enforce these guidelines on these colleges.

There are a few colleges in the city that prioritize educational value, teaching-learning quality, optimal classroom environments by maintaining student-teacher ratio, students welfare, qualification of teachers as per UGC norms and their proficiency, and student-centric instruction. However, these colleges suffer because they lack brand reputation and require immense effort to attract a minimally adequate number of students. These colleges are casualties of adverse impact caused by the so-called elite colleges' greedy pursuit of selling their brand names and maximising their business. No institutes of eminence, such as IITs, IIMs, premier colleges and universities engage in relentless efforts to generate maximum income as seen in these over-commercialized institutions, although these institutes are the highest funded ones from the Government of Meghalaya. One wonders as to what may be the ulterior motives of these institutions. Is it a policy of maximizing profit at the cost of existence of other genuine institutes? This raises concerns about whether this is a healthy trend in the education sector of Shillong city.

Students from the entire North East, as well as their parents, being naïve, often lack the experience and information necessary to judiciously choose insti-

tutions frequently becoming ensnared by the allure of brand names. This situation ultimately disadvantages students, as they may not receive the quality education needed to succeed in life.

In the face of such a malaise in the education sector, the role of the Department of Higher and Technical Education of Meghalaya becomes crucial for systematic intervention. Last but not least, NEHU should enforce its guidelines in letter and spirit, rather than solely exercising selective vigilance over colleges which have no brand names but maintain ethical standards in educational delivery.

Yours etc.,
Mary L Laloo
Via email

Dhar's statements are laughable

Editor,
Apropos of the news item published in your esteemed daily on June 13, 'Dhar pins NPP poll debacle on govt's "shortcomings," it's simply laughable to note who is making this criticism, even as it shows how VPP's recent success has shaken up the government from within.

Sniawbhalang Dhar was arrogant enough to call the VPP 'just an empty vessel that makes a lot of noise' before the parliamentary elections. Seems like one of the richest politicians of Meghalaya has just been humbled in his own home territory, where VPP swept all the constituencies in Jaintia Hills.

Even if governance is to be blamed, the NPP holds four out of the seven Assembly seats in Jaintia Hills

— an area which as per the previous statements of Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma, is under the party jurisdiction of Dy CM Dhar. To call out shortcomings of governance in this area essentially means implicating the self.

To take a larger look at governance issues under Dhar, traffic in the city keeps on growing worse as hundreds of crores are being spent on the Shillong Smart City project, but to what avail? Apparently now Khyndailad will get a new look at a huge and unimaginable cost of Rs 216 crore, as if to say that this is currently the most pressing issue of the capital city — a new look.

There is no sign of a convenient parking lot in the city after six years of NPP governance with even the then MTC properties in Khyndailad being constructed into shopping malls, causing a further future concern for vehicular traffic.

The Mawlai Marten issue, perhaps one of the most shameful issues for tourism of the city, goes under the carpet with statements like, "We are looking into the matter. It will be done. We have identified a solution." And ever since there has been a hue and cry by the public regarding the extreme unhygienic conditions and foul smell of the landfill site, there has been absolutely no solution.

The Municipal workers work in the most unhygienic of conditions, with hardly any protective suits, masks, or gear, with most of them being contractual and having next to nil job or social security.

Dhar Construction Company, run by close family members of the Dy. CM, regularly featured in the

news for being called out by civil society members for poor construction quality of government projects, even as conflict of interests are hardly discussed.

Byrnhat due to the presence of the industrial estate, came out to be one of the most polluted spaces in the country as per a recent study. Perhaps if one sets foot into the estate, it would understandably give the impression that ever since sanction, the estate has probably gone unchecked in terms of pollution, discharge and emissions.

Charity begins at home and Dhar ought to self-reflect while calling out the government's shortcomings instead of wasting time in nitpicking the VPP.

Yours etc.,
Patrick Kurbah
Via email

VPP: Rise of a formidable political force in Meghalaya

Editor,
The phenomenal rise of Voice of the People's Party (VPP) in Meghalaya within a very short span of time since its journey from November, 2021, where the party had contested 18 seats in the 2023 Meghalaya State Assembly elections and won four seats. It also won the recent Lok Sabha election from the Shillong Parliamentary seat sending a clear message that a formidable political force was in the offing in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills region where the voters believe that VPP is the alternate solution to fight against the problems of poverty,

nepotism and corruption in our State. Although every political party emerges with promises of change and alternative ideologies, voters believe that the VPP will bring changes in critical areas of governance and also the voters feel that no other political parties so far in our state have fought elections fearlessly without money power. As such it instils faith and trust among the voters to lean towards VPP and to reinforce the fact that elections can be won without money. Indeed money should not be used to fool the voters which is a very good example to other political parties in our State.

Further, VPP not only fought elections without the use of money power as many voters believed but most importantly they always put God first in their journey which is another plus point for VPP as many voters believe that with this spirit the Party will go all the way from humble beginnings to greater success. Hence, I do hope that if their leaders continue to run their political party with this motive, the VPP will soon replace all the regional parties in our State. Last but not the least through this letter I would encourage all the political parties in our State to see the journey of VPP as a model so that our State will shine again and be freed from the bondage of poverty, illiteracy, favouritism and corruption.

Yours etc.,
Iahmi Khyriem
Jowai

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

"Once all struggle is grasped,
miracles are possible."

— Mao Zedong

The Shillong Times

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Licentious mining: Damn the Environment

THAT 1700 mines and quarries across Meghalaya are operating without any legal sanction and without any punitive action from the State Forest authorities informs that any concern for the environment is all lip service. In a political system where the political class has to pander to the demands of the business magnates unless there is a strong movement to protect the environment things are only going to reach a point of environmental cataclysm. Just before the monsoons arrived the state of Meghalaya's rivers and reservoirs were in the danger zone. The 1855 mines that were surveyed via satellite only give a picture of the broken earth surface where mines and quarries have been dug. The satellite does not capture sand mining from rivers which is going on relentlessly. This unnatural anthropogenic intervention could result in the death of rivers.

Environmental experts contend that sand mining is unsustainable because it transforms the structure of rivers. By removing more sand than the river can naturally replace with the sediment it carries downstream, sand mining carves a deeper, narrower bed. This lowers the water level, speeds up flow and erodes banks — reducing the watershed's capacity to absorb excess water during floods. It also impacts biodiversity by degrading habitats that fish and other species depend on. As the river bed deepens, the water table falls. With growing demand for water, the pressure on ground water reserves increases, leading in turn to further land subsidence, and further flood risks. It's a vicious cycle that people don't think about. It's a fact that the limestone and boulders which are both considered as minor minerals don't have to go through the tougher processes laid out by the Mines and Minerals Development and Regulation (MMDR) Act last amended in 2023. Under section 15 of the above Act the State Governments are empowered to grant mining rights but with the rider that such mines/quarries should not be carried out in forest land and that there should be a properly formulated eco-restoration plan. Indeed all mining/quarrying activities are supposed to be done while keeping into consideration the environmental factors as well as the rehabilitation of the areas affected.

But as is evident in Meghalaya no one really cares about rules and laws and neither is there anyone to strictly implement such rules or laws. This despite the fact that a mining license are procured only after a series of requirement including a 'No Objection Certificate' (NOC) from the Divisional Forest Officer for forest clearance, no matter if the mining area is within a reserved forest or outside it and under the purview of the District Councils. There is also a body called the State Environmental Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) headed by an environmental expert. Is the SEIAA blind to the gross violations of mining laws? Or is the Authority toothless? If so, what's the need for such an Authority? The same goes for the Pollution Control Board and the Directorate of Mining. The question then is — up to what point is mining sustainable in a fragile ecological system — a biodiversity hotspot that Meghalaya is part of?

Election 2024: Who won, who lost and why?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The recently concluded general election is a curious one. The incumbent government, i.e., the BJP-led NDA, returned to power for the third time in a row, which has happened only twice in the history of this country. Within the BJP, however, there was a palpable sense of doom and gloom exemplified by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who himself was looking quite morose. The Opposition, on the other hand, had lost a general election for the third consecutive time. But instead of being dejected, they looked quite invigorated, even demanding that the Prime Minister take moral responsibility and resign from his position. This was not only the view of the Opposition, but a well-known psephologist, who had in the past made the statement on a national channel that you cannot be anti-Hindu and win in the country anymore, also suggested that Narendra Modi should quit politics and retire. Of course, that was never going to happen unless there was an internal rebellion, with the BJP itself demanding a change of leadership.

With the way Narendra Modi made the election campaign all about himself, referring to himself in the third person while making promises or disingenuous Opposition, one can reasonably claim it was not the BJP but Modi who was fighting the election. The fact that BJP lost their majority for the first time in ten years does make a case for a change of leadership. There are still five years left to go for this NDA government, and a change might still happen depending on the results of the assembly elections, but at the moment, Narendra Modi is safe. However, what cannot be denied is that the BJP-led NDA is still forming the government. So, why is the Opposition delighted with the election results? This is where context becomes very important.

The INDIA bloc was fighting the election not just against the BJP-led NDA government but against both state and non-state actors, who for the last decade have been building the narrative that there is no option except to vote for the BJP, especially Narendra Modi. The most obvious one is the mainstream media, which Ravish Kumar, a former anchor of NDTV, now owned by Adani, has termed 'Godi Media' (a lap-dog media or, in simple words, a sold-out media). This section of the media has anchors, according to Yogendra Yadav (the only person who got the seat predictions correct), that act more like the spokesperson of the ruling party, i.e., the BJP, rather than as impartial reporters. During the election coverage as well, when the early phases were showing some signs of displeasure among the populace against Narendra Modi, the pse-

phologist whom I mentioned earlier and another one (who we will come to later) were looking quite dejected. It was only when one of the panelists boasted that in cricket parlance, the BJP is like India and the INDIA bloc is like Zimbabwe that the smile came back for the other panelists. Of course, it's another matter than one of the panelists later cried on live TV when his prediction of 400 seats for NDA came to naught. Before the election, their job was to create the narrative that Narendra Modi was the only person qualified to lead the country. The question, however, is whether that claim has any actual basis. Let's look at some of the views Narendra Modi has expressed in public.

In recent memory, there is the infamous "I am not biological" statement that Narendra Modi made during an interview with an anchor of the Godi Media. But before that, Modi claimed that one can make tea out of gas that comes from the drain; radar not being able to detect airplanes during the surgical strike episode, about how climate change is just about perception and age, and the famous algebraic equation of how one gets 2ab from a² + b², among others. There's also the claim he made that he spent several years surviving by begging but at the same time had gone to jail over a protest for Bangladesh's independence, climbed over 7000 meters of Mount Everest, and many more such grand tales. And finally, there is his educational certificate from Gujarat University, where he did an MA in 'Entire Political Science'. One thing that becomes clear is that while Narendra Modi might be a sharp and astute politician, he is not really a knowledgeable person and has a recurring habit of exaggeration, hence the latest "I am not biological" statement. But perhaps lack of knowledge and honesty can be made up by decisive and strong mode of governance? How's the track record on that front?

Among Modi's most famous decisions is the demonetization of Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 banknotes in 2016 without any warning in an attempt to curb black money. But even his diehard supporters did not support this move and almost all the money came back to the system. There was the sudden announcement of a lockdown to contain COVID-19, which left millions of people stranded without any support. Then there was the announcement of the Three Farm Laws without consultation, which were later repealed after a spirited protest by the farmers. For the indigenous people of the North East, the most reckless was the passing of the CAA, whose rules were recently announced just

before elections. It seems people are confusing recklessness with decisiveness when they analyze Narendra Modi's tenure.

What about bravery in confronting problems plaguing the country? Manish Tewari, the Congress leader from Chandigarh, has recently alleged in an interview that the Government refused to discuss the incursion of China into India's territory despite clear evidence of a violation of the country's sovereignty. More importantly, Narendra Modi has till date not gone to Manipur despite the ad that came out about him stopping the war in Ukraine and his own claim of bringing a ceasefire in Gaza. With all this, one has to ask whether a country of one billion people with more than 75 years of history is bereft of any leader who can do better. Or there has been a deliberate attempt to create a TINA (There is No Alternative) narrative while putting down opposition leaders and praising only Modi. Now that he is back in power, will he change — learn scientific facts, not exaggerate, not be reckless, and most importantly, be brave in facing the problems of the country? Let's wait and watch.

Apart from propaganda from the Godi media, there is the financial factor, as seen during the electoral bond case in the Supreme Court. After being compelled, the State Bank of India revealed that the BJP had the highest amount of financial contribution to the tune of ₹6,986.5 crore, which is at least five times more than what the other parties got. This was ironic since there was a complaint among the economists, including the Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, about the low level of private investment in the economy. While businesses were not investing in the economy, they were busy investing in the BJP. Then there was the incident when the Congress's party's bank accounts, were frozen just as they were preparing for the general elections. The financial advantage the BJP had was best exemplified by the fact that it became the first Indian party to cross Rs 100 crore in ad spend on Google.

While the Godi media was building the narrative and the electoral bonds were strengthening the BJP financially, the ED (Enforcement Directorate) was busy putting leaders of the Opposition, Arvind Kejriwal of Delhi and Hemant Soren of Jharkhand, in jail. On the other hand, people like Ajit Pawar (Maharashtra) and Himanta Biswa Sarma (Assam), on whom there are allegations of corruption became cleansed after passing through its 'washing machine', which is a phrase used to point out how corrupt

politicians are rehabilitated into the BJP. Apart from the ED, there have also been complaints about the Election Commission allowing Narendra Modi to spout hatred against the Muslims. In one instance, he even mentioned the Christians with regard to the use of Sunday as a holiday not being an Indian (read Hindu) practice. That such communal speeches were allowed was a big failure of the EC, which has fallen from grace since the times of T. N. Seshan. Now there is an allegation that in more than 140 seats, more EVM votes were counted than EVM votes polled.

So, the challenges that the INDIA bloc had to overcome to bring down the BJP to below the majority were enormous. Hence despite the loss, they are in a more spirited mood than the BJP, which had all the resources and personnel (state and non-state) ostensibly working in its favour. But the real change-makers in this election were the poor people, especially those from backward communities like the Dalits from rural areas, who voted in favor of the INDIA bloc. Recently, the RBI governor, Shaktikanta Das, claimed in a press conference that rural demand had improved, which means that people's purchasing power had gone up. But when asked by the reporter whether rural distress was the reason for the losses the BJP suffered, raising a question mark on the claims of the RBI, Shaktikanta Das shrugged the question by claiming it was a matter of perception. This is the most important lesson of this election: claims made on mainstream media about the economy and jobs by Godi Media and the experts, they bring cannot win elections if the situation on the ground is not really what is projected. Stock markets do not reflect the real economy, where more than 90% of the workers are in the unorganized sector, living a precarious existence.

The fact that more than half of the country's population is subsisting on free food is itself a big indicator of how things have gone horribly wrong for the people in the country. No amount of boastful claims can change that and translate into an election victory. At least in this election, it did not.

This is an important lesson for both the MDA government and the opposition parties: victory will be short-lived if no real transformation is made on the ground. Sooner or later, people get tired of all the boastful claims and the lies. When that happens, political careers are not just made but also destroyed. If in doubt, ask those who lost the recent elections.

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

Prime Minister Modi's clay feet has a name: Rural distress

Farming community is in dire straits, cannot wait for relief

By Dr. Soma Marla

Rural India limited the Bharatiya Janata Party to 240 seats in the Lok Sabha. And but for the "NDA allies", Narendra Modi wouldn't have become Prime Minister for a third time. The BJP now depends on its partners for the simple majority in Parliament. The BJP lost a third of its rural parliamentary constituencies in 2024, reflecting acute rural distress. MSP, Agrievor and high unemployment, all of these contributed to the BJP's post-pol distress.

The BJP retained only 126 of the 251 rural seats it held in the 17th Lok Sabha. But the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won 221 rural and semi-rural Lok Sabha constituencies. Most of these seats came from Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan. Compare this with 251 rural and semi-rural constituencies in 2019. The INDIA bloc, on the other hand, won 157 rural and semi-rural constituencies in the 2024 election.

The newly-installed NDA government should immediately address issues related to rural distress. The farming community is in such dire straits that it cannot wait for relief. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made a big show of his government's commitment to farmers by releasing the payment for the next quarter PM Kisan Samman Nidhi. But there is nothing special about this direct to bank transfer. The 17th instalment should have been paid in late April, but wasn't because of the Model Code of Conduct in place.

And throughout the course of the election campaign, there was simmering rural discontent. Farmers weren't getting remunerative agricultural prices, there was high rural unemployment, there was a decade-long wage stagnation and rising food prices. The common masses including lakhs of farmers suffered. Naturally, the Modi government was blamed and it paid dearly in the recent elections.

In the last decade and a half, rural distress has increased. The cost of production in agriculture had gone up nearly three times fuelled by high prices of fertilizers, seeds, diesel and pesticides. All of these are essentials for the agrarian economy. Though the government has been periodically announcing MSP for various crops, farmers continue to be in distress, unable to sell their harvested produce in markets. In economic terms, there are two types of incomes. One nominal and the other real. While nominal incomes (in currency terms) saw a small rise with MSPs, "real" incomes were falling. Real income is tied to purchasing power (Consumer Price Index) of consumed food and household industrial goods. As per estimates, real income has decreased by 60 percent in the last 15 years, chiefly due to the price disparity between agricultural and industrial commodities in the markets.

This price imbalance has

resulted in the transfer of nearly Rs 28 lakh crore of the total estimated Rs 42 Lakh crore worth of total farm produce in the country. For every rupee purchase of agricultural goods by a consumer in the super markets, a farmer receives only 26 to 30 paise. The surplus is pocketed by grain merchants, millers and corporate houses. The "real income" that the farmers get is unable to sustain families leading to rural distress. The dismal performance of the farm sector is reflected in the slowdown in average agriculture growth. The Modi government's promise to double farmer incomes was only talk.

Rural distress has not been receiving adequate attention from policymakers. Instead of providing employment and succour to rural families, the Union government had cut budget allocations to pay for subsidies for various government schemes. Example, subsidy allocation for MGNREGA has been coming down consistently in the last 2-3 years. Demand for work under the MGNREGA rose 48.8 percent in April.

There is a continued rise in unemployment, going up to 30.2 million people seeking jobs, according to data from the Ministry of Rural Development. The demand for work under MGNREGA increased sharply by 48.8 percent in April, says NCAER data. The government might have not spent on the subsidies for MGNREGA while tax flows, especially GST, have been highly robust.

While India's provisional GDP grew 8.2 percent in FY24, thanks to the manufacturing and mining sectors. However, the share in GDP and the 'Gross value added' (GVA) has come down to 1.4 percent in FY24. Average agriculture growth is usually at 3 percent. In 2023-24 it was only 1.4 percent. This was coupled with high food inflation. In February-April, average food inflation was at 8.6 percent. The decline in consumption and in rural demand was visible not only in the fall of household items but also in the fall in sales of tractors and motorcycles in rural markets. Instead of resorting to superficial measures, Modi's NDA government should take immediate measures to curtail rural distress: Issue a one-time farm loan waiver; calculate crop MSPs as per the recommendations of MS Swaminathan Commission, bring a law to ensure legal guarantee of MSP for all crops. Nearly 130 million rural poor are deprived of cheap ration under PDS and sections of the poor, including migrant workers, are invisible. Remove GST on the purchase of farm inputs including fertilizers, and farm equipment. Construct grain and cold storage godowns in all taluk headquarters. Pay crop insurance compensation straight into farmers' bank accounts within 30 days of crop damage. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

A den of thieves in a House of Prayer

Editor,
Why has the print media, electronic media, etc. been a platform for members of the church to vent out their disgust, frustration, and discontentment? As members of the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church, we haven't had clarifications nor justifications on the various issues breaking the church apart, even after shooting multiple letters (anonymously or otherwise). As stated by an ex-Church Minister via WhatsApp dated June 11, 2024 (which has gone viral), that he had written a letter to the church committee on May 29, 2023, but no response nor compliance has

been received so far. He also mentioned that few members of the congregation had also written letters but to no avail. In our opinion, we feel it is because the Church Committee has turned a deaf ear to these pleas that the members of the church are forced to 'wash their dirty linen' in public and NOT 'venting out anger and frustrations within' is NOT nipping these misdeeds in the bud.

As congregates, we wouldn't have liked knowing that the future of our church is at stake just because of a few unfortunate events that could have been prevented. The church is a united body of congregates whose loyalty towards preserving its dignity is considered as a sacred duty, which should be upheld through thick and thin. But the obstinate nature of the Church Committee, has forced them to come forward and face disgrace

just because they want the wrongs to be corrected.

What is the reason for keeping these secrets under a hat? Is it to protect someone's name? What lies behind the veil of pretence and deceit? Why is there distrust amongst members of the church? If the Church Committee fails to take immediate responsibility, submit the report, and call for a general meeting, everything will eventually lead to bigger issues and even the division of a once respectable and united institution.

We don't need our church leaders to hide behind a facade of 'unproven and un-beknownst' rumours. Where there is smoke, there certainly is fire. We beg for honesty. The anonymous writer in the letter "Double Trouble for Mawkhar Church: Where Angels Fear to tread the vestry," didn't sound angry. The person sounded concerned

and was simply asking and seeking for honesty because THAT will be the only thing that can extinguish the fire of distrust and disunity in the church.

Yours etc.,

Name withheld on request,
Via email

Case of lone wolves in Parliament

Editor,

The special article "Parliament not a place for lone wolves" by Patricia Mukhim (ST 14th June 2024) made interesting reading. Lone wolves, whether in the context of wildlife or politics often evoke intrigue and complexity. From the wildlife perspective lone wolves are individual wolves that temporarily travel alone or have dispersed from their

natal pack. The reasons for lone behaviour include territorial disputes within packs, leading some wolves to seek new territories. Co-existence within wolves varies across countries. For instance, Spain strictly protects its 2000+ wolves, aiming to increase their population by 18% and encouraging livestock protection measures. Switzerland, on the other hand, eases restrictions on culling its roughly 200 wolves to safeguard livestock in the Alps. There are different views on co-existence. The rationalist view is to control wolves to avoid disrupting pastoral activities, the protectionists' view is to restore "wild" nature, allowing wolves to roam freely and a pragmatists view is to balance needs of different groups, including wolves.

From the political perspective lone wolves refer to individuals who act inde-

pendently, often disrupting established norms. These actors can impact politics world over, sometimes straining relations between different groups. Whether in the wild or in politics, lone wolves challenge existing dynamics and provoke debate. Coexistence and collaboration remain essential for navigating these complexities. The size of an MP from 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency in Lok Sabha is equal to 0.2%. Mukhim is right in concluding that the mandate given by the people of 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency, "be used to meet the peoples' aspirations and not to score political goals. We are a small state and we should matter in the way that our MPs represent us in Parliament."

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Congress must sort out Manipur crisis

Editor,
The two warring sides - Meitei dominated Inner Manipur and Kuki-Zo-Naga dominated Outer Manipur - have, at least, a common choice. The Congress got the mandate from both of those two Lok Sabha constituencies. The people of Manipur rejected the mismanagement of the double engine government. But what is most encouraging is that they have not lost their faith in democracy even after the Kuki-Zo's initial decision to boycott the elections.

Rahul Gandhi deserves credit for this. He promptly visited the troubled state and gave a strong message to the people of Manipur that they were not isolated from the

rest of the country. He narrated his first-hand experience of what he saw in Manipur in the Parliament. Also, the Congress demanded a white paper on the Manipur ethnic violence.

Moreover, Rahul Gandhi started the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra from Manipur. That also helped the people of Manipur to regain faith in the democratic process.

Now, the India partners have become a formidable force in the Parliament. Their responsibilities to fight a democratic battle in the Parliament for peace in Manipur have increased to a great extent.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

Narcissism – why it's less obvious in women than in men



The term narcissism may conjure up images of chest-pumping, arrogant, male self-promoters. The personality trait - with its hallmark features of overt grandiosity, assertiveness and superiority - is, in fact, more commonly observed in men.

That is because these central features align closely with traditional masculine traits. In fact, up to 75% of people diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder are men.

But in reality, narcissism is a modern epidemic that afflicts men and women alike. A new research, published in *Sex Roles*, shows how narcissism manifests itself differently in women - but reveals that narcissistic women can be as dangerous and violent as their male counterparts.

The research reveals that women with high traits of narcissism tend to be more vulnerable and insecure than their male peers. That means it can sometimes be missed

by clinical professionals, for example, misdiagnosed as borderline personality disorder.

Narcissism is a complex personality trait. While full-blown narcissistic personality disorder isn't too common, affecting about 1-2% of the population, we all have narcissism to varying degrees.

Narcissistic personality traits can be expressed in two forms: grandiose and vulnerable. People who exhibit more grandiose features are self-assured and socially dominant. People who exhibit more vulnerable features are introverted and have lower self-esteem. Both forms share an antagonistic core, demonstrated by high levels of entitlement and a willingness to exploit others.

In the context of intimate relationships, narcissism has similarly been associated with men's perpetration of violence. Threats to their self-esteem can evoke feelings of shame, humiliation and wounded pride,

leading to aggressive behaviour.

Although women are less likely to display stereotypical manifestations of narcissism, it does not mean that narcissism is not as common in women. For instance, consider the numerous reality TV stars who are notorious for their self-centredness and vanity - traits often associated with narcissism.

Yet narcissism in women extends beyond self-absorption. Vulnerable narcissism involves traits such as emotional vulnerability, low self-esteem and inhibition. These traits overlap with traditional notions of femininity.

Such gender differences in narcissism may stem from gender-specific stereotypes of masculinity and femininity ingrained from childhood.

Consequently, the tendency for men to display more grandiose features and women to display more vulnerable traits may partly originate from parenting styles aimed at

making boys more assertive and girls more nurturing.

However, there is a danger of interpreting women's narcissism as less harmful due to their initial presentation as more soft-spoken, nurturing, passive and vulnerable than men. Beneath this persona, they may be devoid of empathy and harbour high levels of entitlement and a willingness to exploit others.

This suggests that men and women may be aggressive or violent in different ways. Narcissistic women may be more likely to manipulate people, spread rumours or be passive aggressive than narcissistic men, for example.

The recent research tested this for the first time. In a study of 328 adults (176 women and 152 men), the complex dynamics between childhood experiences, narcissism and the perpetration of intimate partner violence in men and women was examined.

Participants completed an online survey and were asked questions about their personality traits. This captured both grandiose and vulnerable features of narcissism using the Pathological Narcissism Inventory. Participants were also asked to indicate any conflicts that may have arisen during their past or present intimate relationships.

Men scored higher on grandiose narcissism while women scored higher on vulnerable narcissism. Despite these marked gender differences, it is important to remember that narcissism exists along a spectrum. Men can exhibit vulnerable features and women can exhibit grandiose features, too.

Grandiose narcissism in men was associated with greater perpetration of psychological partner violence such as being controlling, bullying or manipulative.

Somewhat surprisingly, grandiose narcissism in men was not associated with the perpetration of physical violence. That clashes with some previous research that measured narcissism using different methods. But overall, men are more likely than women to perpetrate violence, so a proportion of narcissistic men are likely to be violent.

More surprisingly, vulnerable narcissism in women was linked with greater perpetration of physical, sexual and psychological partner violence.

It is important to note here that not every woman with vulnerable narcissistic traits is violent.

Instead, specific features of vulnerable narcissism such as devaluing others (assigning exaggerated negative qualities about them) and having entitlement rage (lashing out when you don't get what you think you deserve) are associated with violent behaviour.

Women who exhibit these features to a higher extent are more likely to be shamefully dependent on others to provide admiration. As a result, they are more likely to respond violently in an attempt to regulate their self-esteem and gain positions of power.

For women, recalling having a caring mother during childhood was associated with reduced levels of vulnerable narcissism and subsequent perpetration of violence toward their partner. This suggests there may be buffers that can be acknowledged and integrated into intervention programmes.

Spotting narcissistic women

Despite longstanding evidence portraying narcissistic men as more violent than women, the research shows that narcissistic women are not only verbally aggressive, as commonly portrayed in studies, but also physically violent towards their partner.

Despite this, the manner in which narcissistic women abuse others may not be recognised as stereotypically narcissistic. Instead, they may use their feminine identity to leverage societal expectations of women as being nurturing and passive.

This might include exploiting their perceived victimhood to gain positions of power and control. Insidious tactics may include making threats of (false) allegations of abuse, withholding intimacy and affection, exploiting their motherhood to turn their children against their partner, and physically assaulting their partner and blaming it on self-defence to gain sympathy from legal authorities.

The research challenges the stereotype that women are always the victims in abusive relationships. This balanced understanding promotes a more nuanced view of relational dynamics and gender roles in intimate relationships.

By investigating features of narcissism in women, we can better recognise and unmask their true nature. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, June 16, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon opposite Rahu on your solar return chart. It is going to be a very promising year for you. There is no need for you to live dangerously, as only systematic approach will bear fruits. Your efforts will bring you excellent results. You will be energetic and raring to go. And will have self-belief in your abilities to achieve wonderful results. Your boss too will have high expectations from you and you will be entrusted with major responsibilities. They will not be disappointed. Your subordinates will listen to you and also value your advice. Financially there will be no major worries. Those who are single could explore marriage market and get favorable response. New love affairs look possible. You could be socializing a lot and meeting lot of people.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This period highlights higher education, spirituality, and children. Personal relations improve with patience, love and care rather than through discussion and criticism. You are inspired creatively and emotionally. Your energy increases for work projects, technical education and religious activities. You would have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You can be unreflective in personal relations, but need to be loving and caring as family and children need your support and care. You would be able to resolve delicate business matters, conflicts and family issues with love and care. You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine good luck and good management. You would please others with your conversation and would give a new approach to communication-related projects, learning, or self-expression. Brisk walks in natural surroundings would be helpful this week.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This is a good time for family, business and trips. You are active, skilful and gentle while achieving success at work. You may find it difficult to make decisions or choices as you are analytical and see both sides of every situation. It is a good time to look at your own patterns of thought and behaviour to make healthy relations with children and you need to take care of your studies. A clear and logical approach brings you closer to your goals. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, design and writing. A strong desire for companionship and sociability dominates. Yoga and meditation are recommended.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Personal matters and ambitions are best attended to and fulfilled as you are at your dynamic best, blessed with confidence and style. You extend your hospitality to family and friends as you entertain and organize get-togethers. Your efforts have paid off as you strike a balance with love and harmony at home. You feel that you are now closer to your children. Business partnership and professional collaboration would be financially supportive. Good planning and management lead to progressive and productive ventures. Health needs care and stress needs to be avoided.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You would benefit through siblings, communications, and short trips. Personal matters and ambitions are best attended to and fulfilled as you are at your dynamic best and blessed with confidence. You have much-needed energy for new money-making projects, or for stepping up existing ones. You may willingly play a supportive role in the family, offering more compassion and selfless love. You are likely to have increased opportunities for travel and new learning experiences. You enjoy talking about what interests you, and you find great value in the exchange of ideas. Health will take a turn for the better if you take up a regular exercise routine.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This is a period for money, finance and communication. You can use the power of words to attract what you want to know with greater ease. Responsibility and maturity are themes when it comes to your family and romantic life. This may also be true of relationships with children. Friends and lovers take priority. People at work might be surprised by your ability to assert yourself and your needs. An excellent period begins for love, intimacy, and rewards. You are likely to enjoy

a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in friendship, or with groups of like-minded individuals. Try to avoid conflicts and arguments. Exercise patience in driving.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You're feeling brave, independent, and eager to begin new projects. You are more stimulated by all that is unconventional and your ideas are original and progressive now. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement, professional success and leadership. This is a rather happy, goal-oriented time on the professional front. This is a time to follow your dreams and ideas, and to plant a seed in the form of a wish for the future. You possess extra charm in your professional life.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Public relations work, promotions, and other such endeavors are favored now. It's a favorable time for your own creations, ideas and for you to apply them in your profession. Financial gains are stronger than any other time. It's a time of creativity, drama, and passion. You are more communicative and busy than usual. This is a great time to present your ideas and to improve your communication skills as you would be in association with younger and talented people and this boosts your confidence level too. Remember, domestic relations cannot be resolved through discussion and analysis but through love, acceptance and freedom. You need to conserve health and energy to meet domestic responsibilities.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Intimacy, spirituality and higher learning are very important to you during this time. You feel emotionally attached with loved ones and family members. Romance, creativity, pleasure and self-expression are on your main agenda. You feel attracted to people with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. You know how to relate to others and you do it in a natural and warm manner. You will seek chatty and vibrant friends who stimulate your curiosity and mental abilities. It's time to compromise and negotiate with family and children. This is a very significant phase, when you are inspired creatively and emotionally.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of old habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery. Money matters are especially important to you in this phase. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources. Give to a partner exactly what you would like to receive. If single, you are more willing than normal to enter into a committed relationship. In general, you are adaptable when it comes to your affections. Instead of having cocktails and drinks have whole fruits and vegetables to feel energetic.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You need the energies, companionship, and support of a loved one. You focus on balancing your personal interests and objectives with your social life. Social interactions of a personal, one-on-one kind are emphasized. Your popularity is increasing in business ventures, and is reinforced by your own ability to cooperate and harmonize. Perhaps you are socializing more than usual on the job. You have good team spirit right now, and you are more tactful and obliging with your co-workers. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for research and meditation. A health routine started now is likely to be successful.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This is a memorable time for communication, phone calls enjoyment and finance. This is a strong period for discovering what gives you the most pleasure. You enjoy feedback from others more than usual, but you do prefer to be the center of attention. It's a generous, pleasantly emotional, and creative phase. You could seek distinction and strive towards perfection in your work. You are feeling inspired creatively, and ready to perform in the same manner. Creative self-expression of any kind is favored at this time. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one this week. You are full of energy and indulge in sports and other physical activities or a structured exercise routine.

Not quite an introvert or an extrovert? Maybe you're an ambivert

Our personalities are generally thought to consist of five primary factors: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism, with each of us ranking low to high for each.

Those who rank high in extroversion, known as extroverts, typically focus on their external world. They tend to be more optimistic, recharge by socialising and enjoy social interaction.

On the other end of the spectrum, introverts are more likely to be quiet, deep thinkers, who recharge by being alone and learn by observing (but aren't necessarily shy).

But what if you're neither an introvert or extrovert - or you're a bit of both? Another category might fit better: ambiverts. They're the middle of the spectrum and are also called "social introverts".

What exactly is an ambivert?

The term ambivert emerged in 1923. While it was not initially embraced as part of the introvert-extrovert spectrum, more recent research suggests ambiverts are a distinct category.

Ambiverts exhibit traits of both extroverts and introverts, adapting their behaviour based on the situation. It may be that they socialise well but need solitude and rest to recharge, and they intuitively know when to do this.

Ambiverts seem to have the following characteristics: 1. good communication skills, as a listener and speaker 2. ability to be a peacemaker if conflict occurs 3. leadership and negotiation skills, especially in teams 4. compassion and understanding for others.

Some research suggests ambiverts make up a significant portion of the population, with about two-thirds of people falling into this category.

What makes someone an ambivert?

Personality is thought to be 50 per cent inherited, with the remaining being influenced by environmental factors and individual experiences.

Emerging research has found physical locations of genes on chromosomes closely aligned with extroversion-introversion traits.

So, chances are, if you are a blend of the two styles as an ambivert, one of your parents may be too.

What do ambiverts tend to be good at?

One area of research focus in recent decades has been personality type and job satisfaction. One study examined 340 introverts, extroverts and ambiverts in sales careers.

It has always been thought extroverts were more successful with sales. However, the author found ambiverts were more influential and successful.

They may have a sales advantage because of their ability to read the situation and modify their behaviour if they notice a customer is not interested, as they're



able to reflect and adapt.

Ambiverts stress less than introverts

Generally, people lower in extroversion have higher stress levels. One study found introverts experience more stress than both ambiverts and extroverts.

It may be that highly sensitive or introverted individuals are more susceptible to worry and stress due to being more perfectionistic.

Ambiverts are adept at knowing when to be outgoing and when to be reflective, showcasing a high degree of situational awareness. This may contribute to their overall wellbeing because of how they handle stress.

What do ambiverts tend to struggle with? Ambiverts may overextend themselves attempting to conform or fit in with many social settings. This is termed "overadaptation" and may force ambiverts to feel uncomfortable and strained, ultimately resulting in stress or burnout.

But personality traits aren't fixed

Regardless of where you sit on the scale of introversion through to extroversion, the reality is it may not be fixed. Different situations may be more comfortable for introverts to be social, and extroverts may be content with quieter moments.

And there are also four other key personality traits - openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness and neuroticism - which we all possess in varying levels, and are expressed in different ways, alongside our levels of extroversion.

There is also evidence our personality traits can change throughout our life spans as indeed open to change. (*The Conversation*)

"There are always flowers for those who want to see them."

—Henri Matisse

The Shillong Times

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BJP & Social Change

THE BJP might, or might not, be engaged in social engineering with a view to promoting the interests of the under-privileged. It has named a long-time legislator Mohan Charan Mhiji, a leader from the tribal community as the chief minister of Odisha. When the BJP got a chance in Madhya Pradesh, some time ago, it installed a leader from the Dalit community, Mohan Yadav, as the chief minister there. The BJP also installed, in Rashtrapati Bhavan, Droupadi Murmu from the tribal Santhal community in Odisha, and previously Ram Nath Kovind, from a Dalit stock in Uttar Pradesh. All these are an extension of the supposedly pro-backward class stand taken by the BJP and the RSS through the installations of Kalyan Singh in Uttar Pradesh and Uma Bharti in Madhya Pradesh as chief ministers, which culminated in the installation of Narendra Modi, a convert from the Forward Class to Backward Class through law, as the Prime Minister. Without doubt, all these paid rich dividends to the growth and sustenance of the BJP as a major political establishment after it struggled with less than five seats in Parliament in the 1980s. A question to ask is, how much does these help in the emancipation of the under-privileged in this country?

Fact of the matter is that the BJP, more than the Congress, represents the elite segments of the society, with a pronounced Brahminical ethos, which it inherited from the RSS. At the same time, there are fewer Brahmins in the Modi government — and large numbers from the backward classes as ministers. The BJP has, much more than during the Congress era, appointed backward classes as governors. It even appointed a Muslim as the governor of Andhra Pradesh and it was the Vajpayee government that made APJ Abdul Kalam the president of India. All these are positive steps in symbolically empowering the disadvantaged communities. In reality, there perhaps is no empowerment. These are essentially tricks to fool the masses and fill the ballot boxes with favourable votes. The Dalit chief minister in Madhya Pradesh, unlike Shivraj Singh Chouhan who enjoyed clout, and the Odisha chief minister are as of now namesakes. They could be used as puppets and may have to act as per dictations from the party leadership and its think tanks. They cannot move a finger on their own. The plight of the tribals or the Dalits has not improved in the last two terms of the BJP-led NDA government. This is because there are "limits" to what can be expected from the Sangh Parivar in terms of social change. The poor people have no mind of their own. They are carried away by symbolisms. India's economic growth will be incomplete as long as these segments of the society are not empowered and given their due.

When Dr BK Tiwari, former Professor of Environmental Science at NEHU, told me that a reporter from the Associated Press, USA, was visiting the state to do a story on the sacred forests in Meghalaya, I was a little apprehensive. Reams of paper have been used to write about the sacred groves in the state, and one wonders if there is anything left to write about these forests. Is there any angle in the story of the sacred forests that has not been explored? The traditional forests kept by the people who live in the Khasi, Jaintia, and Bhoi regions of the state are generally classified as sacred forests, community forests, and even clan forests. However, except for the sacred forests, the purposes for which the forests were conserved differ, and the traditions and regulations governing these forests vary from one place to another. Indeed, many aspects of the sacred or even the community forests in the state have already been studied, but is there nothing more to study and is the list of topics for studying the sacred groves exhausted?

The Raid Buam and Traditional Natural Resource Management

I am reminded of my visit last winter with Donbok Buam, accompanied by Sumner Buam, the Lyngdoh of the Raid, to the many forests of Raij Buam. During that visit, I learned that the Raij Buam has many forests reserved and conserved by the community. According to Buam, the many forests, which have a combined size of no less than 5,000 hectares, were conserved for different purposes. The interesting learning that day was also that the entire traditional system of forest conservation in the Raij is very scientific. It is, in a way, a systematic Natural Resource Management (NRM), albeit in a traditional manner. There is a sacred forest, but there are also forests kept specifically for the people of the Raij to use for firewood; another forest for the community to use as logs and planks for building houses. There is one forest conserved for the wood to be used for cremation, and the larger forest at the entry to the village is kept because it supplies water to the village.

Most Raids have only sacred forests, and some also have forests where the wood is to be used as firewood for cremation. However, Raid Buam is different. Raid Buam is unique because it is the only Raid with detailed and pragmatic natural resource management in place, albeit traditionally. All the forests under the Raid are conserved to meet the common needs and requirements of the people. It is also true that Raid Buam and many other Raids were able to conserve their forests because a significant population in the area follows Niamtre or Niamtynrai, and the forests are respected and not desecrated because religious sacrifices and rituals are still performed to appease different deities. However, keeping sacred forests is not solely the obligation of the Niamtre people; there are cases where keeping sacred forests goes beyond a specific religion.

The Sacredness of the Forest Continues

Another lesson comes from Sohmynting, a village I visit regularly for my work, but I only learned about its unique story when I accompanied my youngest daughter in her research for her master's dissertation. The story of the sacred forest in Sohmynting village needs to be shared because it is unique when compared to sacred forests in the entire state. It is different from the other sacred groves in the area because most sacred forests are maintained and protected by the Raid or by followers of Niamtre. In most cases, the forest remains intact because rituals and sacrifices are still performed by the followers of the traditional religion.

It is also perhaps not wrong to conclude that in areas where locals have converted to another religion, the forests are not properly maintained, if they remain at all. In some places where there are no followers of Niamtre, sacred groves are encroached upon by neighbours and, in some cases, even desecrated. The case of Sohmynting is different; although the entire village has converted to different Christian denominations, and there is not a single person in the village that follows Niamtre or the traditional religion, the forest is still kept intact by the clan. Despite the fact that rituals and sacrifices are no longer performed in the forest because the members of the clan have adopted Christianity, they continue the tradition of keeping their sacred forests.

June 13, 2024. Therefore, I, as an independent entity of the Church demand a public written apology for the act of infringement and the dubious attempts to destabilize the very foundation and belief of the other members of the Church. I hope that the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church will rise up and not remain insouciant in response to the egregiously evil forces that are at work today.

Yours etc,
VB Lyngdoh
A loyalist of the Church
Shillong - 2

Is MeECL a liability for the consumer?

Editor,

In early February, I was shocked to receive my electricity bill. It had suddenly jumped from Rs 469 to Rs 1483, and the following month, it surged even higher to Rs 2824. Fearing disconnection, I reluctantly paid these inflated amounts online while raising complaints with Megha Power via email. I waited for a long time, but I did not hear back at all.

Desperate for a solution, I visited the MeECL office, hoping for a quick resolution. A concerned officer suggested that the meter might be malfunctioning and advised me to replace it. I promptly completed all the necessary formalities and paid for the new meter. They replaced the meter about a week later and assured me that they would adjust any overcharges appropriately.

However, my relief was short-lived. The inflated bills

that followed mirrored the previous anomalies. I have so far made five more visits to the MeECL office, each time seeking a resolution and facing the same frustrating runaround, sometimes unable to meet the revenue officer because he was not at his desk. I wonder when they will resolve my issue and send me the correct bill.

If someone like me is compelled to run from pillar to post for a seemingly petty matter, what about the countless others, especially those who are illiterate or come from far-off places? One businessman, shared with me that he had paid inflated bills for seven months. His busy schedule prevented him from visiting the MeECL office frequently, and it took him several visits and complaints before his issue was resolved. "When my billing issue was finally resolved, I felt an immense sense of relief and triumph, almost as if I had won the lottery!" the businessman said.

This ordeal raises a critical question — has MeECL become a major liability for its consumers? The officers' lack of diligence and sheer lackadaisical attitude add to the frustration of the consumer. In this digital age, why must consumers go through such arduous processes for every trivial issue? Why must resolutions come only after heartbreaking stress?

In the greater interest of consumers, I urge the higher authorities to take immediate and serious action. If necessary, strict disciplinary action should also be initiated. MeECL must upgrade its customer support system

and overhaul its administrative management without further delay.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

10 billion dollar pipe-dream

Editor,

The NPP led-government under the leadership of Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma aims to improve, innovate and create new avenues for developing the state be it in road communication, markets, health system, education, civic amenities, tourism, human resources etc. Unfortunately, many of these aspirations appear more like a mirage. Someone has to put things in a straight-forward manner and tell the CM that when even basic amenities, infrastructure etc., are not up to the mark then what is this government selling to the world? No one has questioned the intricacies of the Smart Village Movement which has nothing to show for its success or the Smart City project where potholes still dot the streets of Shillong and the state highways as well. Even today villages have to remain cut-off from electricity, water and what not. This current government has only succeeded in recruiting unproductive consultants who are usurping the state's exchequer. I wonder if our local, unemployed educated youth are so bereft of intelligence that they cannot be engaged as state consultants instead of Meghalaya employing any Tom, Dick and Harry from outside who knows nothing of the ground realities.

development, new thinking has started in some churches, and although the forests are not called sacred or even considered sacred as such, the fact that some churches have started keeping forests is remarkable. What is the thinking behind the decision to keep the church forest, or why do some churches feel the need to have their own forests? One possible reason for the church to keep the Khloo Balang is to have a good stock of wood to be used as planks for making coffins when a church member dies, or it could be a plan for a cemetery in the future. Whatever the reason for keeping the Khloo Balang, it indicates that forests are integral to the people, and keeping forests is deeply rooted in their minds. Keeping a forest is a tradition that is not old and forgotten, but one that people still take pride in and continue to this day.

Necessity is the Mother of Invention

The story of forest conservation in Mustem village is another case that testifies to the fact that people initiate new efforts to protect or start new forests for the common good. The village has many community forests, but this particular forest was conserved by the Dorbar Chnong with a very specific, bold, and far-sighted vision for the benefit of the whole community. The forest is conserved because it is the source of water for the river Sajri, and the villagers are very clear in their vision that they need to protect the forest to ensure that the river continues to provide them with potable water. Indeed, today the dorbar chnong uses the water from Wah Sajri to supply water to the village through the Jal Jeevan Mission project. The story of Mustem village is a one which foresees an imminent problem in the village and addresses the future needs of the community.

Conclusion

Forest conservation is not just the legacy that Khasi Pnars have inherited; they continue to grow and come up with new ideas to conserve forests. The above stories are classic cases where people's connection with the forest is very visibly demonstrated. In fact, these are stories that we should share every day and every time we celebrate World Environment Day. Next time, rather than planting trees, it is better to share these community conservation stories which could also inspire others to do the same.

Job prospects in the government sector are getting scarcer since all the tax payers' money seems to have gone into deep pockets of selfish people. Let's see whether those who are good at shouting on the streets to demand justice really dare challenge the current political leadership with tough questions. Only then only will the real results be revealed.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

Land for doctors serving in Meghalaya

Editor,

Your daily dated 14th June, 2024 had quoted the Health Minister stating that rules do not permit doctors from outside the state to buy land here. She went on to say that doctors who wish to serve the people of an under-developed state should be 'committed' to fulfilling the obligations they swear by.

One wonders how the rules allow the allotment of land for IAS Officers (non-tribals included) in New Shillong. Guess these officers are not expected to be 'committed' to their obligations to serve the state.

Different rules for different categories of public servants! There's a limit to hypocrisy!

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
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.

Time for a 'NEET' overhaul of admissions to medical colleges

Review entire process of entrance into higher education courses

By Dr Arun Mitra

Irregularities in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), an examination conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA) for admissions to medical courses, has raised many serious questions. A record number of 67 students obtained the perfect score of 720 out of 23,33,297 who appeared for the test. Never have more than three students got full marks in this test since 2020. Two, scores of candidates reported that they were not given question papers on time or were handed wrong question

edge has limited the scope of assessment at a wider scale. Several coaching centres have come up for those appearing in the NEET and other such admission tests. Students are encouraged to join coaching centres with the active connivance of their schools. The coaching centres charge exorbitant fees and students from low income families are automatically ruled out. Besides, the proportion of candidates from rural areas has come down.

The entrance test was started at the national level



papers. Three, the Optical Marks Recognition (OMR) sheet of some students was torn and their results were delayed. Four, for no fault of several hundred candidates, their results were blocked.

Such irregularities have to be taken seriously as they put the candidates in extreme mental stress and thousands of candidates make more than one attempt at the test. These candidates are unable to bear the stress and several take the extreme step of ending their lives.

Was there leakage of question papers and at whose behest? That many OMR sheets were found torn shows the total failure of the National Testing Agency (NTA) which

so as to ensure that the private medical colleges do not charge exorbitant fees and will not hold their own exams. But the private medical colleges have got around this hump by holding mop-up counselling for candidates applying to their colleges. Private medical colleges charge hefty amounts for admission to their courses. Candidates from low and middle income groups are the worst hit.

Several states are now demanding that they be given the right to take decisions in the admission process and be exempted from NEET for the state quota seats. NEET should be only for the central quota and for central govern-

"Affected candidates should be provided relief. The NTA has now cancelled the grace marks and ordered re-examinations for 1563 students. But why should the entire test be conducted again? A retest under stressful conditions cannot be a level playing field and those asked to go for the retest may not be able to perform well a second time."

should be held accountable and the persons at fault should be taken to task.

Affected candidates should be provided relief. The NTA has now cancelled the grace marks and ordered re-examinations for 1563 students. But why should the entire test be conducted again? A retest under stressful conditions cannot be a level playing field and those asked to go for the retest may not be able to perform well a second time. If they have to still undergo the retest, the expenditure should be borne by the National Testing Agency (NTA).

It is ironic that the admissions to the higher education courses have not been streamlined even after so many decades. The very basic principle of education for all and its purpose to prepare good citizens and empathetic doctors is being flouted. Instead of becoming a means to fulfil the given objectives, education has become the means to make profits.

There was a time when the marks obtained in the 12th class were the criteria for admission to higher courses. MCQ as the means of judgment of one's knowl-

ment controlled colleges. This will protect the states' rights to provide education. It must be recognised that India has a diversity of cultures and different levels of development.

Therefore, it is important that the students from low economic status should be supported by the government. Fees in the private colleges should be capped and made transparent including for the management quota seats. The clause of charging government level fees in the private colleges for 50 percent seats should be effectively implemented. The government should decide the fees for the other seats. Students from a rural background should be awarded extra marks for admission purposes. There should be dialogue among the various stakeholders including students' organisations, teachers' organisations and academicians. It is important to ensure that education does not become a 'only for profit' business. The State should own the responsibility to impart education on the principles laid down by the Kothari Commission. (IPA Service)

"The history of the past is but one long struggle upward to equality."

— Elizabeth Cady Stanton

The Shillong Times

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Headless State Commission for Women
SEXUAL violence in Meghalaya – a matrilineal society is on the rise. Over and above that there is domestic violence too but the aggrieved women find no relief since the State Commission for Women that was created with the intention of addressing their grievances and that of adolescent girls that are now being preyed upon, has been without a Chairperson to direct its functioning. When the Social Welfare Minister was asked why this position remained unfilled he first stated that his Department is on the lookout for an incumbent to fill the post. Later he cited the Model Code of Conduct. Now that the election is over, what's the delay about?

The last appointee – Phidalia Toi was alleged to have placed her political loyalties above her commitment to the Commission and to have actively campaigned for the National Peoples' Party (NPP) whose active member she is, during the run-up to the Assembly election in 2022-23. Toi was appointed to the Commission because she is a crd carrying member of the NPP. In Meghalaya there is no chance that the best person would be appointed to any critical position. There are always strings attached. Those affiliated to political parties are appointed irrespective of whether they fit the bill and are equal to the task. The list of appointees of the present MDA Government are enough indication that the word competence does not exist in its dictionary. These appointees - paid from the state exchequer eat up quite a substantial chunk of public money. The abysmal performance of the NPP-UDP-HSPDP grand alliance called the MDA, in the recently held Lok Sabha elections is also because the public that has been helplessly watching this nepotism have finally got their pound of flesh by defeating the alliance partners and electing both MPs from the opposition.

Why should it take so long to appoint a competent person to an important post unless the Government is trying to find someone that will toe their line? That is what most governments want and the women of this state are voiceless against this gross infirmity. It is a fact that in Meghalaya today there is no active and robust women's organisation that can take on the Government. In the past the Synjuk Kynthei led by women of eminence and character such as Queenie Rynjah, Silverene Swer, EN Shullai, Sitimon Sawian among others would have taken on the Government for debilitating the Commission and rendering it effete. Those were the days when the Synjuk Kynthei challenged the then Chief Minister DD Lapang for hand-picking Dr. Biloris Lyndem who was never known to have been a woman activist with any knowledge about the problems that ail women, as the first Chairperson of the Women's Commission. The Synjuk Kynthei attended the meeting where Dr Lyndem's name was announced and with one accord all the members walked out of the meeting. CM Lapang came out and requested them to re-enter the venue but they refused and gave him a mouthful. That's what's called women's empowerment. Now the Synjuk Kynthei and other women's organisations seem to have lost steam and the gumption to take on the Government. That's what matrilineal Meghalaya is reduced to – a sham if there is one!

And the winner is...the voter...who should not be taken for granted

By Andrew W Lyngdoh

The gruelling 2024 Lok Sabha polls has taught politicians and political parties umpteen lessons. But the biggest takeaway from the hustings was that the voter should never be taken for granted. The BJP's 'Abki Baar, 400 Paar' ended in a whimper much to the chagrin of its top leadership who thought that their divisive speeches, communalism, parochialism and hyper nationalism would get the votes they desired. But the voter had other things in mind. Although the voters did not overwhelmingly vote for the BJP, yet it could form a coalition government with the help of its allies under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). For now, India has a coalition government, a thing which was missing, in the real sense, for the last 10 years of Narendra Modi though the last two governments were dubbed as NDA governments.

Coming to Meghalaya, the drubbing of the ruling National Peoples' Party (NPP) was on expected lines though the victory margin of the MP-elect in Shillong and Tura took many by surprise. Who would have thought that the voters of Tura Parliamentary Constituency would dethrone Purno Agitok Sangma's progeny by a massive margin? Who would have dreamt that a soft-spoken Assistant Professor at the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) would relegate the NPP candidate to the third position? In more than a year, the NPP's vote share in Meghalaya dropped drastically.

Winning in 26 out of 60 Assembly constituencies in the 2023 polls, the NPP's vote share was a staggering 31.49% (5,84,337 votes). Fast forward to the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, and the NPP garnered 4,15,166 votes - 2,28,678 votes from across 24 Assembly segments in the Garo Hills region, and a mere 1,86,488 votes from 36 Assembly segments in the Khasi Jaintia Hills region. Agreed that a general State Assembly poll is different from a general Lok Sabha election. Voters vote differently in different elections, but this year, the NPP's drubbing was much more than just voting differently.

Let us come to the Khasi Jaintia Hills region. The Voice of the People Party (VPP) has undoubtedly cemented its place in Meghalaya politics. There is no looking back for the Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit-led party. By winning in 32 out of 36 Assembly segments, the people had given a decisive mandate to the party candidate, Dr Ricky Andrew J Syngkon, who could garner a staggering 55.02% of the votes polled. This is stupendous by any measure. The exit poll of 'India Today-My Axis India' got it right on the Shillong Parliamentary Constituency and the vote share of the winning candidate. But the same exit poll got it completely wrong for the Tura Parliamentary Constituency. Hence, the writing on the wall was clear since day one that the people wanted change. The anti-incumbency wave against the then

sitting MP of the Congress, Vincent H Pala, the uninspiring candidature of Dr M Ampareen Lyngdoh from the NPP, and the negativity, which surrounded the NPP-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA-II), pushed the voters to the VPP.

Right from the start, the NPP candidate and the 'star campaigners' made unmissable errors. By unnecessarily attacking the VPP instead of projecting the achievements of the MDA government since 2018, the candidate and the campaigners fell into a massive trap. Knowingly or unwittingly, they played directly into the hands of their political opponents. The NPP State President, Prestone Tynsong, was never taken seriously by any serious voter. The Deputy Chief Minister representing Pynursla constituency has been a subject of ridicule from many quarters principally due to his own illogical utterances in every campaign. He needs to do some serious introspection before he brings himself and the entire NPP down to the pits. Defending Tynsong is defending the indefensible. But it was not just Tynsong. Nearly every known campaigner was bashing the VPP on trivial issues instead of focusing on the NPP's agenda. Of course, the NPP had to defend and clarify on allegations leveled by its opponents. But the manner in which it was done, made even fence sitters jump to the VPP. Negative political campaigning can win you some elections, but not every election.

It was also shocking that the NPP agreed to align with the BJP and for the latter to decide not to field candidates from both the constituencies. It was a grave mistake. Electoral politics is like a game of chess, one wrong move, you are checkmated, and you would have to wait for another five years. Had the BJP set up its own candidates, perhaps the drubbing would not have been severe. In fact, the BJP karyakartas were upbeat as they were inspired by their mascot, Narendra Modi, and the party's slogan of 'Abki Baar, 400 Paar.' But all the excitement went down the drain. From the Shillong Parliamentary Constituency, the BJP had garnered around 76,000 votes in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. In 2024, the transfer of BJP votes to the NPP was not visible. The NPP could win in only one of the two Assembly segments held by the BJP. Clearly, the alliance did not work. The same was with the Tura Parliamentary Constituency where the alliance did more harm than good to the NPP. But we cannot expect the NPP to sever ties with the BJP especially when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is back at the helm of affairs in New Delhi. It would be politically unwise to cut ties with the BJP and after knowing fully well how vindictive the BJP leadership could be against its opponents.

What should worry the NPP in the Khasi Jaintia Hills is that it lost in 9 out of 10 Assembly segments represented by its MLAs. The lead taken by the VPP was massive as well. The Party's MLA and MP candidate could also win by a small margin from her own backyard. Clearly, the party organisation was at the receiving end. It had no answers to counter the VPP in spite of the many flaws of the VPP in its campaign trail. Instead of a pro-active campaign, the NPP was busy reacting to the narrative set by the VPP. The VPP could capture the imagination of the voters, especially women and youth, as it won the perception battle. Soon after the general Assembly polls in 2023, the VPP did not rest. It went hammer and tongs against the NPP-led government in every village and town. The NPP, on the other hand, was laid-back. It did not imagine that the scale of VPP's interactions with the voters even after the elections had concluded, would create a massive negative perception leading to its ultimate decimation at the hustings.

Politics is all about perception. Reality seldom matters. The one who wins the perception battle, emerges victorious. The NPP had lost the perception battle in the Khasi Jaintia Hills much before the 2023 Assembly polls thanks to its motor-mouths, inability to counter narratives (example: the allegation that this government is by the 'high-level', of the 'high-level' and for the 'high-level'), perception that the government is run by a few bureaucrats while those who were elected by the people hardly have any say, ineffectiveness of social media campaigns (on the road to 2018, the NPP was very effective on social media), absence of a proper information dissemination system to tell voters what the NPP government has done, is doing and will be doing for them. In short, whatever achievements in its credit have been overshadowed by negativity. How the NPP counters these challenges will remain to be seen.

For the Congress, it was a humiliating loss. The contesting candidate, Vincent H Pala, who was blamed for the Congress exodus in 2021, had to eat humble pie after winning in the last three consecutive elections. With no organisation at the grassroots, and with only few legislators, it was a daunting task for Pala unlike in 2019 where it was a cakewalk. Before his humbling defeat, the former MP could not win in the 2023 Assembly polls from his home constituency of Sutnga-Saipung in East Jaintia Hills. Before and after the polls on April 19, 2024, there were Chinese whispers that Pala would attract the 'silent voters', and that he could be on his way to Parliament for the fourth consecutive term. But that was not to be. Perhaps, even the silent voters became louder for the VPP. We have to wait and watch whether a rejuvenated Congress would replace him as the Meghalaya PCC chief.

The Congress undoubtedly needs a politician to run its affairs. The last thing it requires while on the path to recovery is a businessman leading the party. But over the years, the line separating politicians and businessmen in Meghalaya, have been blurred.

Coming to the Regional Democratic Alliance (RDA) - an electoral umbrella of the United Democratic Party (UDP) and the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) - There was no ambiguity that it would be decimated at the polls. Its candidate, a greenhorn in electoral politics, was unable to garner even the support of the two HSPDP legislators whose effigies were set on fire by a pressure group, which was then led by the RDA candidate himself, after the 2023 Assembly polls, at Motphran. Moreover, many of the regional voters had decided that the VPP should be the one replacing the UDP/HSPDP as the principal regional party in the Khasi Jaintia Hills. Observers say that this would be manifested in the Autonomous District Council polls if the current VPP wave holds till then, and that the UDP/HSPDP could be wiped out. However, politics is dynamic.

A word for Meghalaya Chief Minister and NPP Chief, Conrad K Sangma. Ever since he started his career in electoral politics, he is seen as well-meaning, amiable, accommodative, non-confrontational, and a consensus-building figure. But every political leader has to face challenges, and he will be assessed by how he handles those challenges. Of course, the drubbing of the NPP at the hustings is a massive setback for Conrad and team. There are no two ways about it. He is also to be blamed for the lacklustre performance being the party Chief. But to say that the Lok Sabha outcome was a mandate against Conrad Sangma is politically puerile. For now Conrad needs to reinvent his mojo. Time is there for course correction. What he does henceforth and how he does it, will make the difference. He also needs to tighten his grip on governance, bureaucracy, and the party (in that order) before it turns out to be 'too little, too late'.

All have learnt their lessons from this mega Lok Sabha polls. In Meghalaya, it was the most hotly-contested parliamentary elections ever, and it would be etched in people's memory for a long time. But as the dust has settled and the EVMs are back to their backyards, it is time to govern, legislate, and fulfil promises. People will evaluate. At the end of five years, they will decide. From this election, we hope that the voters have comprehended the power of 'one vote'. It made a difference in 2024. It will make a difference in many other elections as well. As long as voters do not take the 'one vote' for granted, no political power would ever dream of taking the voter for a ride.

(The writer is a Shillong-based journalist)

Political hubris and Icarus

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

According to an ancient Greek myth, while escaping from Crete, Icarus flew too close to the sun despite being warned by his father Daedalus not to do so. The heat from the sun melted the wax that held his wings together and he plunged into the sea and drowned. The end of Icarus was because of 'hubris' which basically means excessive overconfidence filled with pride and arrogance. The myth also narrates that his father had already warned Icarus about hubris and the need to avoid it. The saying 'do not fly too close to the sun' comes from this story. Hubris and Icarus are hence always taken together when trying to make a point about pride and downfall – pride comes before a fall.

The 2024 Meghalaya Lok Sabha election saw political hubris from the NPP in both the Tura and Shillong seats. There was an air of arrogance and a sense of entitlement about the party. NPP harped upon what it has done as something extraordinary and positioned itself as the only party that can govern Meghalaya. It took pride on being part of the NDA with full confidence that the coalition would come back to power at the centre. The deal to partner with the BJP in the fight for the Tura and Shillong seats was a gross miscalculation of the ground realities. The hubris was such that most of the party cadres were never taken on board and consulted with. This single move cost the NPP both the seats. Now it is hurting so bad that it is hoping for the winners (INC and VPP) to fail.

While the Tura result was bad, the Shillong seat was a total humiliation. It underscores how detached the party has become from the very voters who were with them in the 2023 MLA election. It will be difficult to garner back the support of its vote bank for at least some years. The same goes for the other regional parties like the UDP and HSPDP. Unless something massive happens that works in their favour (like say it is proven that VPP is corrupt), it will be difficult times for them in the foreseeable future. In the current political picture, they have had their Icarus moments. Although the Indian National Congress (INC) lost the Shillong seat, its victory in the Tura seat is being viewed by the party as a revival. The BJP is a fringe party in Garo Hills and the tie-up with the NPP proved to be the final nail in the coffin. Friends of this writer narrated how clips/videos of atrocities on Christians spread like wildfire in Garo Hills thereby denting the chances of NPP. But, it would be wrong to attribute Saleng Sangma's victory only to this factor. The Garos say Agatha Sangma's campaign was overshadowed by the governance of her brother and Meghalaya CM Conrad Sangma. It was more like he and not her was fighting the election. According to many Agatha just seemed to fade away and was a shadow of her past. Plus, Saleng is considered in Garo Hills as a 'pro-poor guy' who understands the plight of the

rural masses while Agatha is more of an urban-centric politician.

In Khasi-Jaintia Hills the groundswell of support for the VPP is something to be closely analysed. VPP calls it a political movement. But, it is too early to classify it as such as a movement basically requires two elements – one, it must sustain over a significant period of time, and two, it must garner the support across the rank and file irrespective of caste, creed, class, faith and religion. Currently it has not met any of these two elements. Plus, can the recent expulsion of its frontline members be taken as a case of political hubris?

Today in Meghalaya there are only three political parties – NPP, INC and VPP. INC is a grand old party and NPP has been at it for quite some time. They both have had their share of ups and downs. Yet they are still alive and kicking-on. VPP is a very new party which so far has been only on the up. The true mettle of a political party is proven by the manner in which it tackles difficult situations. Currently, VPP has a lot of 'political credit'. This means that even if the party does something wrong the voters will still continue to support it. For instance, even if Shillong MP Ricky Syngkon gives 'issue-wise' support to the NDA at the centre its supporters will not mind. This is because VPP would be selling it as 'we gave support for such an amendment, bill, etc as it is in the best interest of Meghalaya.' Parties like the NPP do not have such a luxury. In a discussion with some taxi drivers from Smit area it is amply clear that the voters will back VPP to the hilt if it does not sway away from its current path of – working for the jaitbnyriew and protecting the interest of the jaitbnyriew. They also would like to see how the VPP governs. This means that the VPP bandwagon would continue till the Meghalaya MLA election 2028. In the meantime, how would the Shillong MP repay the trust of the voters? For NPP and others it would be food for rebuttal.

The 2024 Meghalaya Lok Sabha election shows that the power is in the fingers of the people. The voters cannot be taken for granted. In this age of media technology, political information is readily available to all. Good deeds and bad actions are reported to all. Voters analyse political developments and then decide which party to vote for. Hence, it is wrong to say that they vote only on the basis of emotion. Saying so is nothing but an insult to the intelligence and discerning power of the voters. In fact, the voters have voted with some hope and expectation in mind. They want to see change. They want to position Meghalaya as a state which is against divisive and sectarian politics. This is the key takeaway of this Lok Sabha election.

The victory of the INC in Tura is testament to the continued resonance and relevance of the party in Garo Hills. (The writer teaches at NEHU; email: blyngdoh@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Reservation demand lawful; threat to commit violence is criminal

Editor, I would like to comment on the various headlines that appeared on Saturday, June 15, 2024. Firstly, the Voice of the People Party (VPP) through its President, Ardent M. Basaiawmoit, has made a submission to the Expert Committee, that although the Reservation Policy talks about Representation in terms of population, the accurate census data was not taken into account at the time when it was implemented. According to the data cited by the VPP, the population of Khasi people comprised 45% of the State population

while that of the Garos was 32%. But interestingly, the GHADC MDC Rinaldo K. Sangma, also provided data on the representation of the communities in the government sector, and stated that the representation of Garo people is 35% while that of the Khasi people is 61%. So, if we compare the data given by the VPP and the data given by the MDC Rinaldo K Sangma, our Garo friends are not under-represented. Their representation already exceeds the proportion of their population, even as the representation of the Khasis too exceeds their proportion. This is not unlawful as it also means that in some cases, meritorious candidates did not need to avail of the benefits of Reservation. So, there should be no question of unfairness, or under-representation as per the Law. But there are some

organizations or unions that are warning of violence if the policy is corrected. One such is the All India Garo Union, that warned of riots. If such organizations are law abiding, they should spread awareness about the law, and not normalise such threats. But I believe that such organizations do not speak for the majority of the peaceful Garo people. Similarly, a recent viral video of Education Minister Rakkam Sangma's communal speech, if it was real, does not speak for the majority of Garo people, judging by the thumping loss of the NPP. So, at the end of the day, the law should prevail, even when it comes to Reservation. It should be logical and consistent as per the historical policies for reservation given to all STs in the country and in the State. Let us hope the Expert Committee abides by the Law, and not by assumptions or wrong

bases for Reservation. However, the threat to violence is not lawful, but criminal. Yours etc., Kitdor H. Blah, Shillong

Whistle blowers versus dog whistling

Editor, Through this letter I beg you to allow me, a communicant member of the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church who regularly pays tithes to the church, to also respond to the letter captioned, "Mawkhar Presbyterian Church Dilemma: Case of breach of trust" (as appeared in your esteemed newspaper dated June 17, 2024). Allow me to begin by saying that there is no dilemma in the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church, except for those who wish that the rot of the Church be buried under the

carpet, but for how long? Similarly, there is no washing of dirty linen in public as we are all aware that in 2019 the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church was already in the news for the reason that the "poor chowkidar" has been alleged to have stolen or misused our tithes and consecrated money, which is public money, of the Church. Of course this matter is sub-judice and the matter is under investigation and scrutiny by the respective police and court authorities. However, I must commend the Church Committee for taking the decision to report the matter to the Police and also a few Church Committee Members, who we all know that till date are leaving no stone unturned to pursue the matter to its logical end. That is the only reason we still hope that truth and justice will be made known to us in the foreseeable future.

In the past few days we read several letters highlighting the "affairs" of alleged corruption and abuse of power in the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church by "a few elected elders and deacons". Naturally it is a big shocker for the regimented members of the church to read about Church matters in a secular newspaper, but nothing should surprise us that we are now living in a different era where free speech is valuable and the normalization of corruption in every layer of our lives mandates everyone to come out and speak truth to power. The suggestion that the revelations of the rot inside the church is the handiwork of insiders who are driven by ulterior motives and the spirit of vendetta is nothing but an attempt to digress from the main issue. Interestingly, the writer VB

Lyngdoh seems to agree that there is an act of corruption in the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church that needs to be addressed. But the writer fails to acknowledge the crucial role of whistle blowers. Now it is up to us to discern and with whom to identify. The revelation of the case or the alleged case of corrupt practices which are ongoing in the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church have now become the battle between the unnamed whistle blowers and those who are just dog-whistling. Whoever the insiders are, I personally admire their guts to blow hard the whistle against "corrupt practices" inside the iron clad vestry of the Church which is so difficult for a lay member to pierce. I believe they are doing so for the sole purpose of saving the Church Community from further damage and are doing so at the cost of their own lives

and liberty. However, those who are just dog-whistling the matter must gather enough courage to tell their "church masters" to investigate the matter and bring out the names of the insiders (whistle blowers) in the public forum of the Church Community. But at the same time they must also call for Church Dorbar to lay bare all the reports on the table and together we deliberate and end this matter once and for all. Any cover up is not healthy and my only prayer is that the Church Committee must not take the members for a ride for far too long. Yours etc., I. Sutnga, Shillong-2

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

"Mistakes and pressure are inevitable; the secret to getting past them is to stay calm."

— Travis Bradberry

The Shillong Times

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Fears over EVMs

IN the age of electronic revolution, it was natural and fitting for India to have taken advantage of this and introduced the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) for polls from Parliament down to state assemblies. While the Opposition has often raised its misgivings, the system implemented in the country since the late 1990s in a phased manner has gained full currency by now. The Election Commission had introduced the system developed by the state-owned Electronic Corporation of India and Bharat Electronics. These machines operated on battery and are not linked to the internet. These neither have wireless access or interface. This was reassurance that they cannot be tampered with from outside.

However, not everyone is convinced that EVMs are tamper-proof. This, despite a Supreme Court ruling that the system was in order and that the concerns in this respect were "unfounded." The Supreme Court in Delhi is not the Oracle of Delphi. What it says is legally the last word but doubts would linger. Now, a debate on social media by two worthies, Tesla CEO Elon Musk and former Indian IT minister and top techie Rajeev Chandrasekhar only added to the public concern related to EVMs. Musk, an authority on the subject, stresses that EVMs can be hacked. "The risk of being hacked by humans or AI, while small, is still too high." The former IT minister however argued that this was not possible at all. True; Chandrasekhar himself is proof and he was defeated in the recent LS polls in Kerala.

The play of electronics is all-pervasive. It cannot be seen but its feel is all-encompassing. It changed life wholesale across continents. Its power is beyond perception. With electronics technology, anything is possible — and we know too little about its sweep and sway. Remote control and video calls were flights of fancy till a few decades ago. Today, these are a reality. EVMs are capable of providing instant results. But, our systems are such that the wait for poll results lasts several weeks after the voting is done. What this goes to stress is that the electronic voting system itself needs a lot of improvement. Complaints surfaced this time about a close relative of a candidate unauthorisedly handling a mobile phone that carried in it the security key to EVMs in the constituency. Apprehensions are many. The election results of Andhra Pradesh, this time, went against the YSRC despite its massive rolling out of welfare programmes targeting over 70 per cent of the population. Techies supporting a rival political establishment had the last laugh. The BJP-led NDA managed to get just enough seats for a comfortable majority in Parliament despite the sullen mood of the electorate. The fact of the matter is, anything is possible in a technology mediated world.

Reservation Saga: Day of reckoning is near

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Nothing in recent memory has generated so much political heat in Meghalaya as has the demand for a review of the 50-year-old state reservation policy. Under pressure from the hunger strike organized by the VPP, the MDA Government was compelled to constitute an expert committee to examine the issue. The last date for the general public to submit their suggestions to the committee was June 15, 2024. It has now been extended by another month. While the Khasi are demanding that the old policy be amended to give more seats to their community, the Garo are adamant that the status quo should be maintained.

A group known as the All India Garo Union (AIGU) has warned of the possibility of riots if there is any modification to the existing 40:40 formula. I would request that the group not further inflame the situation, which is already very fragile, by making such irresponsible statements. The frustration of the Garo is understandable considering the fact that, as per the 2019 data of the Government of Meghalaya, they were able to avail only 26% of the jobs, much below the 40% that was promised to them under the State Reservation Policy. In comparison, the Khasi cornered 60% of the jobs—20% more than what was allocated to them. This is more than the seats available in the open category, i.e., 15%, which means that the jobs meant for the Garo and the other STs were given to members of the Khasi community. Now that the Garo community feels that they are finally in a position to fill up their quota, the demand by VPP to change the formula must be very infuriating. The solution, though, is a constitutional one, and violence or the threat of violence can never be condoned.

One is well aware of VPP's stance, which is about giving reservations based on the population sizes of the different communities. That would mean that reservations for the Khasi and the Garo would come down from 80% to 77%, with the share of the Khasi increasing by 6% while that of the Garo decreasing by 9%. One can understand why the Garo would be against this. There is another proposal, though, that appears to take into account the concerns of both the Khasi and the Garo. The Hymnietwep Youth Council (HYC) has suggested that the expert committee should rework the formula to 50:40, 50% for the Khasi and 40% for the Garo. In this way, the concerns of both the Khasi and Garo can be met without the latter losing their existing share. However, the other ST/SC groups and the general population are going to lose their existing shares, 5% and 15%, respectively. In fact, these groups have already made their own demands. The non-Khasi-Garo STs want

their share to be increased to 15%, while the Rajabala MLA, Dr. Mizanur Rahman Kazi, has asked for reservations to be limited to only 50% of the seats as mandated by the Supreme Court of India.

The 50% limit for reservations was introduced by the 1992 Indira Sawhney and etc. vs. Govt. of India judgment. Under paragraph 94A of the judgment, the nine-judge constitution bench came to the conclusion that "reservations contemplated in Clause 4 of Article 16 should not exceed 50%." Meghalaya's 80% reservation is in breach of this judgment. Some people, though, are of the opinion that the present arrangement can be defended on grounds of "exceptional situations" under which the 50% rule will not apply. They argue that Meghalaya falls under "exceptional situations." That assertion is yet to be tested. But even if the breach of the 50% rule is upheld, people seem to ignore the rationale behind the 50% rule.

The nine-judge constitution bench was of the opinion that Article 16(4), which deals with reservation, speaks of "adequate representation and not proportionate representation (i.e., based on population size). Therefore, according to them, "what is more reasonable than to say that reservation under Clause (4) shall not exceed 50% of the appointments or posts, barring certain extra-ordinary situations as explained herein-after?" So even if you exceed the 50% limit, the rationale cannot be population size. In states outside the North East, wherever the 50% cap was breached, it was due to the addition of the 10% meant for EWS, which was brought into the Constitution as part of the 124th Constitution Amendment Bill. So, population size can only be made the criteria for reservation if an amendment is brought into the Constitution with the word "adequate" being replaced by "proportionate." This must be what Congress leader Rahul Gandhi intended to do when he announced that the party would remove the 50% cap if voted to power.

Therefore, it's very difficult to understand how VPP's demand for a reworking of the formula to reflect population sizes is legally tenable unless a constitutional amendment is made. It is important to note that the VPP is not even part of the INDIA bloc, while Saleng Sangma is the Congress MP from the Tura seat. He will definitely apprise Rahul Gandhi of the ramifications of any change that might harm his own constituents. So, even if a constitutional amendment is brought about, it may not satisfy VPP's expectations. The amendment could say that the overall reservation will be based on population size,

but the reservation among the backward communities will be based on criteria other than population, e.g., comparative backwardness.

A similar concern was raised by the HYC, which has asked the Expert Committee to delay their recommendations until the Supreme Court decides in the case of State of Punjab vs. Davinder Singh. This particular case concerns the Punjab Government's circular, which provided that out of the seats reserved for SCs, 50% would be offered to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs on the ground that they were more backward than the other SCs in the state. This is being challenged at the moment. Since reservation in Meghalaya is based on a similar sub-classification, viz., Khasi, Garo, and other STs, the outcome of the case will be relevant for the state.

The issue of sub-categorization within backward classes was discussed in the 1992 Indira Sawhney judgment as well. The present Court has also taken cognizance of the observations made in the 1992 judgment, which held that categorization among backward classes is advisable so as to prevent the comparatively more advanced group (Goldsmiths in the example given in the 1992 judgment) from taking away the reserved posts meant for the less advanced group (Vaddes, traditional stone cutters in Andhra Pradesh). To prevent it, the judgment suggested "equitable apportionment of the vacancies reserved (for backward classes) among them." This is exactly what the Meghalaya State Reservation Policy did, at least in the case of the Khasi and Garo.

HYC argues that if the Supreme Court holds the sub-classification of STs and SCs as constitutionally and legally valid, then the reservation should be 50% for Khasi, 40% for Garo, and 3% for the other STs. The problem with this demand is that if the sub-classification is held to be valid, it will actually mean giving more seats to groups that are comparatively more backward, like the Government of Punjab did (give 50% of the reserved seats to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs with the remaining 50% for the other 37 SC communities). In such a scenario, this would mean more seats for the Garo and other STs compared to the Khasi since the 'North Eastern Region: District SDG Index, Report, and Dashboard Baseline Report 2021-2022' has clearly revealed that the Khasi districts are comparatively better off than the Garo districts.

The other argument made by HYC is that if the sub-classification of STs and SCs is declared constitutionally invalid, there should be a combined 93% reservation

for all STs. This will be to the detriment of the Garo and other STs. The open category seats will also come down from 15% to 5%, which will also hurt the general category. The HYC's 50:40 formula is attractive, as long as the other STs and the general population also accept it. If they don't, the issue will definitely go to court. If the issue goes to court, with the 50% cap still valid, there is a chance that the present reservation could be brought down to 50% unless the "exceptional situations" argument is accepted to be valid in the case of Meghalaya.

When the VPP raised the demand for a review of the state reservation policy, they must have consulted legal and constitutional experts on the matter. Otherwise, they would not have created such a ruckus and brought the whole state to a state of confusion and anxiety. Personally, I am still not convinced that their demand can be met unless there is a constitutional amendment. But that's my personal opinion, and there will be those who argue against my views. There are, however, two requests that I would like to make that I think we will all agree on.

Firstly, the expert committee should no longer delay the consultation process and submit its recommendations. Secondly, those who are going to be unhappy with the final decision of the government should go to court instead of creating problems or threatening violence. In case the government decides to maintain the status quo, the VPP should lead the legal challenge with the help of their legal and constitutional experts. Most probably, the court will deliver its final decision before the next assembly election. If VPP were to win the case, that would be a vindication of their stand, and they would stand to profit immensely. They may even form the next government if they can stitch an alliance with the other parties. But if they lose, and worse, if the 40% guaranteed reservation for Khasi is taken away by the Court, it will signal not only the end of the VPP but it will also destroy the intellectual credibility and the political careers of all those who are associated with it. That stain of having destroyed the lives of thousands of Khasi youth will not be easily removed.

If the stand taken by the VPP is vindicated and they win in court, they will become the most powerful political force in Meghalaya. If not, they will be remembered as a black spot in the history of the state. VPP has taken a big gamble, and that has helped them during this MP election. But will it bring the same dividends in the future? Time will tell.

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Dare to be a Leader. I Over three decades ago, while a young Rotarian, a game was played by the over hundred members of my club, and it was about who they felt was most popular. I was pleasantly surprised to find I had won.

Two years later, there were some issues I felt I had to take a stand about, and found I'd become the most unpopular person around.

Last year, the same club called me as a guest speaker. I found the members had a grudging respect for me, for having taken a stand over three decades back. Which made me want to broach the subject about popularity and respect today, ultimately leading to good leadership, especially as a so-called popular politician's been cut to size, due to respect for him, being on the wane.

To a great extent, the difference between popularity and respect is that one is about surface appearance while the other is about admirable qualities that lie within. In a world dominated by social media, it's easy to be tricked into believing the person with the most "likes" is the winner.

However, would you do business with someone just because he or she is popular? I don't think so. You're more likely to want to do business with someone you respect ... and that usually comes down to what we once called "good morals".

Isn't that old-fashioned? Surprisingly, no. According to the Carmen Honacker, the qualities we most respect in other people are:

Integrity: Having a code of ethics, based on common decency.

Courage: Doing what's

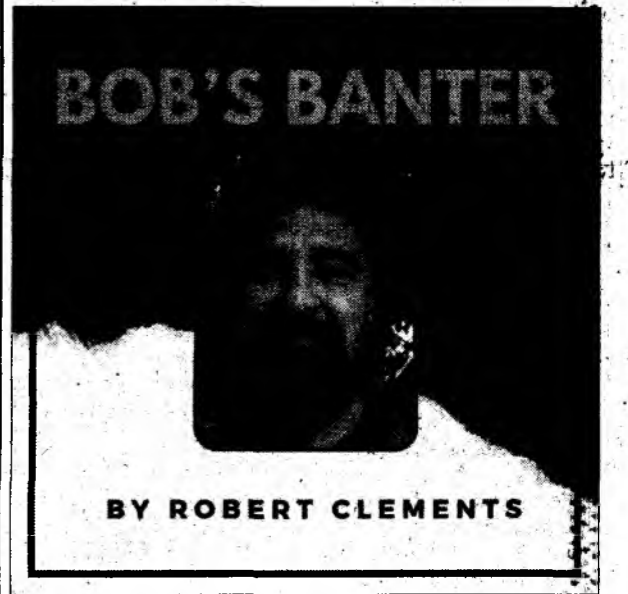
There's something amiss in this country: There's somebody who's going round the world pounding his chest and shouting, "Look at me, see I'm back for the third time," and there's the world saying, "I think you've got it wrong, there's a brother and sister, who seem to have more leadership qualities than you!"

I believe, and this is not a political article, that these elections have shown us qualities of true leadership. And let's learn some pointers about leadership from the election's that's happened.

First learn we are human, not gods, and so limited in our understanding or thinking, so never neglect taking ownership of your mistakes or the mistakes of your team. That is what strong leaders do. They take full responsibility for mistakes, and they are respected much more for doing so.

Secondly, have the boldness to point out what's not worked and propose methods that will work. Yes, you need to become a problem solver. Which means to think out solutions. People respect problem solvers and solution finders more than blamers. Even if people don't fully accept your proposal, they will respect you for providing one. It shows that you are truly invested in making things better, and you will gain a reputation for generating ideas, solving problems and improving processes.

Thirdly, treat other people not just the way you would like them to treat you, but go one step further and treat others the way they want to be treated. Which means investing time and thought to find out and delve into the strengths and weak-



right, even when it's inconvenient or puts us in a difficult position.

Humour: Laughing to get through tough times. No, this is not about ridiculing others.

Social intelligence: Accurately reading people's emotions or what's going on below the surface in social situations.

Emotional maturity: Owning your emotions and accepting the full range of feelings, yet choosing to express them maturely and appropriately.

Kindness: "True popularity comes from acts of kindness and kindness goes hand-in-hand with compassion."

Self-confidence: We need a balanced view of our weaknesses and strengths, and to see mistakes as opportunities to grow. No self-esteem or an inflated sense of self-worth are dangerous.

Discipline: Having the dedication and persistence to stick to your goals and working to achieve what you believe in.

Generosity: Giving our time and money to create a better world. At the end of the day, life is about people — how can I sit back and do nothing when I am blessed, yet others are in need?

Self-awareness: Acknowledging no-one is perfect and having the humility to put others first, no matter how successful we are.

As one wise writer says, "Popularity is doing what people want, and respect is doing what people need."

A disclaimer before I move on is that I don't pretend to have these qualities I've just penned, but would certainly aspire to get there!

Now let's get on with these qualities leading to good leadership.

nesses of others. This is very important as we are not generalising but serving a specific purpose. Focus on what they need and what they care about.

Fourthly, learn to ask questions and remain open to new ideas. Yes, from the recent elections we have found that people really don't like know-it-alls. If you go around diminishing others while acting like you have a monopoly on bright ideas, you will be disliked. People will respect you less because they don't feel you value their ideas or expertise.

Fifthly, learn to deal with conflict even when it's uncomfortable. When you avoid conflict, you send a message that you are afraid, or that their needs are inferior to yours. Turning a blind eye to a conflict as what happened in Manipur is more the style of Nero playing the fiddle while Rome burned.

Finally, allow criticism from others. Never think that only weak people need others. Strong ones have the courage to allow others to provide assistance. When you ask for help, you show your strength. You show that you are indeed confident in your abilities and have the willingness and courage to accept guidance. You show others that you don't believe yourself to be superior to those around you, and you create opportunities for others to contribute to your development.

Yes, there's much that we can learn from these elections, if only we look closely.

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 or bobbsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Dire need for teachers on Environmental Studies

Editor, I am writing to stress the critical importance of having trained Environmental Studies teachers in our schools and colleges. Environmental education is not just another subject; it is a vital component of our students' education that prepares them to understand and tackle the pressing environmental challenges of our time. When Environmental Studies is taught by educators who lack specific training in the subject, the impact on students is significantly diminished. These teachers, often from different fields, may prioritize completing the course over delivering the content effectively and engagingly. Their primary focus remains on their main subjects, resulting in a superficial treatment of environmental topics, which fail to inspire or inform students adequately.

Environmental Studies require specialized knowledge and teaching strategies that only trained educators can provide. These teachers are

equipped with the skills to connect theoretical concepts with real-world applications, making the subject relevant and compelling. Their passion and expertise foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of environmental issues among students, empowering them to become informed and proactive citizens. Not everyone can teach Environmental Studies efficiently. It demands a comprehensive grasp of ecological principles, environmental policies, and sustainable practices, coupled with the ability to convey these concepts effectively. Trained Environmental Studies teachers possess this unique combination of knowledge and pedagogical skill, ensuring that students receive a meaningful and impactful education. Investing in trained Environmental Studies teachers is an investment in our future. By ensuring that this subject is taught by dedicated professionals, we can cultivate a generation of environmentally conscious individuals who are equipped to make a positive difference in our world.

Yours etc., JK Jana, Shillong-8

Please restore power in Mookhep village

Editor, I am a resident of Mookhep village, East Jaintia Hills district and it is very sad to say that the village has been without electricity for weeks due to a blown transformer. There has been no response at all from the Power Department which has just turned a blind eye to the sufferings of the people residing in this small village. Through your esteemed daily I would like to awaken those people and request them to please understand the situation and the sufferings that we have to face and get the transformer fixed as early as possible.

Yours etc., Nissar Fazil, Mookhep village E.J.H

Sexual violence reaches its pinnacle

Editor, Nearly every second day news channels, newspapers, radio, social media and all sources of information invariably carry news of sexual abuse, rape and murder of women and girls. What is dis-

turbing is that these crimes are not limited only to perpetrators who are strangers but most of the perpetrators of these crimes are people known to the girl/woman and the family. It could be an uncle, a cousin, a brother, a father and in the most recent case it is a friend. Yes, a friend that lured the 4 minor girls to go to a nearby village only to be raped by a group of 12 men. It is disquieting to even imagine the cries of helplessness, vulnerability and the pain that they may have endured while the monsters incarnate overpowered them. These girls will not only live with this scar but they must be going through mental trauma, depression, suicidal tendencies, low self-esteem and much more.

What happened to the four minor girls from South West Khasi Hills District must make us reflect at the way the world is moving even while we must find reasons as to why our women and girls are subjected to violence and atrocities especially in this century. The root cause must be determined though it may not be wrong to read that such heinous crimes are committed and are so rampant because of a sick and unhealthy mentality, perverted mindset and corrupted souls of the op-

posite sex. The other reason being the lack of conviction rates for such crimes.

Our judicial system is such that perpetrators of crime are seldom awarded any punishment for heinous crimes committed by them or if awarded it usually amounts to only a few years jail term. The judicial process is so lengthy and tedious that it takes the victim years to get justice. At times it is even justice denied since justice is delayed.

If we take a look at the events around us it appears that our society is becoming an unsafe place for women and girls in particular. The hands no longer shiver while we rape, murder, loot, kill and plunder! Violence of any form is detrimental to the wellbeing of the citizens. It is a disease that if not tamed will plague the entire society. What has been witnessed in the past few months in our state are various forms of violence meted out on innocent people whose lives are scared for life or whose lives have been wiped out from the face of this earth. Ironically, we need to fear no monster or alien but fellow human beings with flesh and blood. What could be sadder than to have to live in a society amidst fear and suspicion?

Yet this is how we are made to live our lives.

What needs pondering is that as elders, parents, guardians, young people, the law makers, law upholders and the society as a whole shouldn't we be conscious, aware and alert about the violence, cruelty and brutality prevalent in and around us? Have we become so immoral that we lack fellow feelings? Have we stooped so low that we don't shudder to inflict pain on anybody? Have we become so arrogant that we fear nobody? It looks like we have, otherwise things would have taken a different turn. Conscience would not be taking a back seat. Is this the world that we would like to pass on to our children?

Thus, collectively and unitedly we must work together to ensure that our girls, women, men and children are safe and can live their lives without any fear. Let us nurture our young boys and girls to become conscientious and responsible human beings for the peaceful coexistence of all in this world.

Yours etc., Jemieffer Dkhar, Via email

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

"If you have no confidence in self, you are twice defeated in the race of life."

—Marcus Garvey

The Shillong Times

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MDA Govt should prioritise roads

ROADS are the lifeline of any state. Without a good road communication network a state cannot expect its economy to grow exponentially. Roads affect the health of the citizenry adversely as it takes longer for people in Meghalaya's rural areas to reach the healthcare institutions. Roads are the arteries through which the economy pulsates. They link the farmers to the markets; the students to their schools; the workers to their jobs and the sick to hospitals. It would have been intuitive for any government that is astute and wants to retain the goodwill of citizens to concentrate on road making and good roads at that. It was not without reason that when Late PA Sangma was Chief Minister, he brought the Oriental Company – road construction company to construct some of the best roads in Shillong city and the peri-urban areas. Those roads lasted for over a decade and needed no repair work. But Sangma paid the price for addressing a crucial backlog in Meghalaya – its roads. He lost his job after a two-year tenure because the contractor lobby revolted against the idea of an outside company taking away their profits.

But at this point in time when all the roads are in shambles – broken and exposed, do people have the courage to take on the contractor class in Meghalaya? People forget that money for road-making comes from the public exchequer and that every contractor should pass a strict audit of his/her work. People should now demand that an external agency be engaged to audit all the roads in Meghalaya and give its unreserved opinion on why the state of our roads is so decrepit? Too much money has gone into the pockets of engineers and politicians especially all those ministers currently holding or who have held the Public Works Department (PWD) portfolio.

A Government that cares for its citizens would make a list of the strategic roads that link people to important junctions. For instance the Umroi bypass is currently being expanded and in a mess due to the rains. This expansion work should have been undertaken during the dry months between November to March, more so when the Umiam Bridge is under repair and people need to use alternative routes to reach the airports and railway stations. The so-called VIP Road from Mawlai to Umroi airport which is now being extensively used is also in an appalling shape. This road too should have been repaired and made road-worthy before taking up the repairs of the Umiam Bridge. It just shows that this Government is trundling along unthinkingly. Fact is that VIPs who are paid to think cannot figure out some of these basic problems because they don't have to wait for hours to cross the Umiam Bridge. They are after all the privileged class and it's the people who have accorded them that privilege. It is time for people to strip the VIPs of their privileges and give them a taste of their own medicine.

Letters to the Editor

MDA Govt has failed the people

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial in The Shillong Times dated June 18, 2024, I would like to share my observations. In this State of ours, every scheme, every policy, plan, decision, every work of the Government invariably takes a U-turn when it comes to implementation. I vividly remember an interview of Social Welfare Minister, Paul Lyngdoh pertaining to the appointment of the Chairperson of the State Commission for Women. When the Minister was asked why the delay in appointment of an incumbent to head the Commission, his prompt reply was, "Delay? Where is the delay? There is no delay." Such a dismissive and non-committal statement from the Minister has naturally resulted in the non-appointment of a Chairperson till date. The graph of crimes against children, girls and domestic violence are on a speedy rise yet the Commission specifically constituted to tackle such crimes is rudderless for such a long time. Does this MDA Government care about the fate of women and children who are raped and assaulted regularly? Or are they waiting till it affects their own homes and families?

Another very important aspect is the fate of our land-fill. Marten which had handled and is still handling the

pressure of hundreds of tons of waste and is at the brink of spilling over to the road or to the Umiam lake. This matter remains unresolved. In the past, many ministers in charge of this MDA 1 & 2 along with pressure groups and members of Mawlai youth bodies have visited the place and had promised to take up the work on a war footing by tackling the matter with modern technology so as to help the Marten dumping ground sustain the onslaught of waste from the city so that it can still be a sustainable landfill. But the irony is that it's all words and promises that lack sincerity and true commitment. They were spoken just for the heck of it and Marten continues to suffer.

Now Marten is in a terminal stage. Prove me wrong if I remind readers that only last year the KHADC had also pledged to tackle the Marten catastrophe with financial help from the World Bank. Alas! This promise too seems to have gone to the drain. This present Government is in a sleeping mode and as such fails to prioritize the needs of the people and tackle those on a war footing until completion stage. But as citizens we know we can no longer trust the Government with regards to its obligations and responsibilities.

Coming to the Smart City project the less said about this the better. Maybe it will materialize only after half a century but certainly not during my lifetime. At this

Review of Reservation Policy a litmus test for the state

By Albert Thyrniang

The All India Garo Union (AIGU) threat of violence vis a vis any change in the Reservation Policy is a shocker. The Union warned of the possibility of riots if the 40:40 Reservation Policy for the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo communities is altered. The statement is condemnable. However, it underlines the strong feeling the people of Garo Hills have against any change in the existing policy. All stakeholders in the western part of the state want nothing less than the status quo. If the 40:40 formula is modified, unrest is not ruled out. Common sense foresees it. It happened in the past. Learn from the past for history not to repeat itself.

In the last few days the expert committee, which came into effect in September last year, has been busy receiving representations from political parties and groups in Shillong, the state capital. Broadly speaking, those from Khasi Jaintia Hills favour change in the 1972 promulgated policy while those from Garo Hills are sternly opposed to any review, leave alone revision and modification. The proposals from the eastern region include hiking the reservation to more than 40, ranging from 45 to 50 %, for their community. The advocates for the change claim the Khasis and Jaintias combined are significantly more in number than their counterparts, the Garos. Notably the Voice of the People's Party (VPP) whose president Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit's hunger strike in May last year gave birth to the expert committee, has reiterated its demand for a 50 % share while that of the Garos should remain intact. If the percentage is not enhanced then the voices from the Khasi-Jaintia sector are of the view that Khasi-Jaintia and Garo communities should settle for a joint reservation of 80 per cent. A political party has even suggested that the reservation for all the tribes of the states should be a combined 93 per cent.

However, the groups representing Garo Hills are firmly against the above notions. In no uncertain terms they stand for the maintenance of the current 40 per cent quota. Anything less will be unacceptable. Former Tura Legislator, John Leslee K Sangma has even written to the expert committee demanding that the reservation for his people ought to be elevated to 50 per cent citing that the Garos

have not reaped the fruits of reservation. It is not only the All India Garo Union that has warned of violence. The GSU too foresees a law and order situation if the minimum of 40 per cent reservation is lowered.

The proponents of the hike for the Khasis and Jaintias naturally see the benefits. Even the advocates of the joint 80 per cent for the three major tribes, the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos or the 93 per cent (or whatever) for all the tribes think their people are to gain. The Garo Hills 'representatives' on the other hand reject the above suggestions on the plea that the Garos are at a disadvantage, educationally and economically.

With such contrasting views a meeting ground is hard to find. It is a litmus test for the review committee to navigate. It is a tough ask to satisfy everybody. If the expert committee perceptibly goes against any then group passions will run high. It is not only in Garo Hills. It is applicable to Khasi-Jaintia Hills as well. Tension could arise here too if the committee's decision is 'unfavourable'. Rumours will spread like wildfire. Instigators with vested interests, will mislead the gullible and agitated public. Even if a non-sectarian and completely evidence-based conclusion is arrived at as envisaged by The Thma U Rangli Juki (TUR) mobs, we know, are not ruled by reason. The review of the Reservation Policy is a test for the unity of and co-existence of the three tribes in the state. It is a challenge for peace and harmony in Meghalaya.

The review of the Reservation Policy was not the reason for the birth of the VPP in November 2021. Clean politics was the core founding principle. The review of the Reservation Policy became part of the VPP's agenda only when Adelbert Nongrum joined the party in January, 2023, prior to the Assembly elections. The former lone National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) MLA had in March the previous year moved a resolution in the Meghalaya Assembly demanding a 'review and revamp' of the Policy but he was defeated by a voice vote with none supporting him. The VPP then agreed to include the demand to revisit the Policy to pave the way for Nongrum's entry. The prospect of a winnable candidate

to add to their numbers in the 2023 elections was too good to be missed.

The VPP enlisted the Reservation Policy in their manifesto in the February 2023 Assembly elections. The VPP won four seats and soon began to make their demand heard through various media. It culminated in the indefinite fast of its supremo, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit that lasted for 10 days. Unnerved by the massive support from Khasi and Jaintia Hills the government buckled under pressure and hurriedly made the pact to review the Policy which the chief minister himself had described to be 'time testing toll' while replying to Nongrum's resolution.

Many among the VPP's founders are academicians. As true scholars they carefully crafted the ideology of the party they would establish. Concerned at the degrading polity in the state they decided to change the way politics is practiced. Alarmed at the rampant corruption they decided to found a political party that would fight for its eradication. Troubled by the sight of how voters were bought by wealthy candidates during elections they dared to set up a party that promises that their candidates would do none of it. This was a great idea but to dare to execute it was even greater. The founding fathers proved everyone wrong when voters aligned themselves with the philosophy of the VPP and voted overwhelmingly for their MP candidate this time.

However, in the VPP there are also politicians who arrived from street politics. At least two of the MLAs, including the number-one, comes from a pressure group background. They were shrill pressure group leaders before graduating to active politics. Their instinct of 'quick solution' still persists. Hence the politics of Reservation Policy was drafted in. Clean politics is attractive but the leadership suspected it would not be sufficient to win seats. The Reservation Policy was an apt opportunity. It is the demand for the review of the 'outdated' policy that skyrocketed the popularity of the VPP. The humiliating 'loss' of NPP and Congress MLAs and MDCs in the recent MP election is attributed also to the demand for review of the Reservation Policy.

The VPP demand for

review of the Reservation Policy is certainly linked to politics. It is quite a straightforward demand to raise the 40 per cent reservation for the Khasi-Jaintia tribe and lower that of the Garo community according to the population of the two major groups. The VPP does not care about reservation for the deserving, the underprivileged and deprived sections. For political mileage it expounds a general increase for the residents of Khasi and Jaintia region. To be fair it is not only the VPP which keeps mum on reservation for those who deserve the state's positive discrimination. All those who have lined up to present their submissions have excluded this point in their document. We point to the VPP because through its 'initiative' the policy is being reviewed.

The Thma U Rangli Juki (TUR) is the only exception. The organisation proposed that the 'Deprivation Point System' be adopted in the new policy. A newspaper report says, "This deprivation point would be based on both the individual's family background as well as where she (he) is from and where she (he) has been educated."

This is a noble concept because we know very well that the job reservation policy has benefited the elite and creamy layers most. It is the children of politicians, bureaucrats, government employees, the educated and the rich that have harvested the fruits of reservation. In the same families there are three-four members who are employed in the government. Generation after generation government jobs are 'handed' over to those in the same family.

No political party will like to change this practice because in politics too it is the same. In Jaintia Hills wealthy politicians even commission their children to contest from outside their home districts. Hope the VPP banishes this money power practice. In the Garo Hills we have two Sangma families. Saleng A Sangma is the first in nearly five decades to defeat the PA Sangma family in the Lok Sabha elections. This trend should continue otherwise it is the electorate that make politicians think that politics is reserved for them.

To avoid unnecessary bad blood the review of the Reservation Policy could be put on hold for another 15/20 years unless the overhaul is to bring deserving sections at par with the rest.

Leave church matters alone

Editor,
I respect the views expressed by the writer of the letter captioned "Whistle blowers versus dog whistling (ST, 18.06.2024)". However, I find it amusing likening 'the insiders in the church' who keep flagging the issue of alleged corrupt practices in the church to 'whistle-blowers'. I don't know whether the meaning and application of whistle-blowers is properly understood, especially in the context of the church.

I humbly believe that ecclesiastical matters should be dealt with differently as opposed to secular matters, subserving the sanctity of the church though without compromising on truth and justice.

The fact of the matter is that there is no question of and there is no need for any whistle-blower(s) as far as the affairs in the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church are concerned, because as stated, the church itself in 2019 had announced the swindling of a huge amount from its funds following which an FIR was filed by the church and subsequently, the matter became sub-judice. Once the court is seized of the matter, the law would take its own course. Therefore, there is no question of anybody trying to cover up or bury the matter in a hush-hush manner as is being suggested. The truth will

finally come out one day.

The relevant question here is whether some have lost faith in the judicial process/system that they have to keep stirring up the matter in public domain through the media and that too, hiding behind the cloak of anonymity. This would serve no purpose other than giving credence to the belief that there could be some hidden agenda or a vicious campaign against the church and some of its leaders.

What would really help the church at this time is for its members with some issues, questions, doubts, or even suggestions to formally write to the Church Committee or meet it in person because I believe that everything can be addressed and settled amicably without having to resort to other means not in line with the church and its working. I also hope that the church would do its part honourably and responsibly.

As believers, we are reminded not to conform to the world but rather transform it by the renewing of our minds. I hope we all pay heed to it.

Yours etc.,
V B Lyngdoh
Shillong-2

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.

**Why the hullabaloo over jobless Indians joining the Russian army
Many armies recruit nationals from friendly countries to fight wars**

By Nantoo Banerjee

The government's strong reaction to the news of the death of two Russian Army-recruited Indian nationals in the Ukraine war asking the Russian authorities for an early release and return of all Indian nationals serving in the Russian Army does not seem to be quite justified. It may be even considered as uncalled for in view of the long standing defence relations between the two countries that had tremendously benefited India during a difficult period. There is nothing secret about those young Indians going to Russia to take up helpers' jobs in the Russian Army. The government was fully aware of it. Jobs in security forces are never risk-free. All Indian recruits were believed to have been apprised of the risks related to the job before they signed the contract to join as "army security helpers."

In fact, the Indian government was well aware for many months that scores of young Indians had signed up for Russian Army jobs. However, the government did not take up the issue seriously with the Russian authorities until two of the boys were recently killed in Russia's two-year-old war against Ukraine. No one knows for certain about how many Indian nationals are presently serving the Russian Army and in what capacities. The government is yet to officially disclose the number in public. Indians are not the only foreign nationals working for the Russian Army. A good number of Nepalese citizens were also recruited as soldiers by the Russian Army. Since January, this year, Nepal had stopped delivering permits for its citizens to work in both Russia and Ukraine. At least 10 Nepali soldiers had been reportedly killed in the Russia-Ukraine war while serving in the Russian Army.

Russia has been recruiting men from friendly countries in Asia and Africa since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They are not professional soldiers, but wage earners. The pay packets offered by the Russian Army are said to be highly attractive in the Indian context. The Indian recruits are offered a monthly salary of Rs. 1.95 lakh each and Rs. 50,000 as additional benefits. The contract is valid for a minimum one-year period and mandates no leave or exit before six months of service. Normally, such recruitments are made under mutual understanding or agreement between the authorities of the concerned countries.

Earlier this year, under an Israel-India diplomatic dialogue, over 6,000 Indian workers were supposed to have reached Israel in April and May for construction work in a country which has been deeply engaged in war against Hamas militants since October last year. The ongoing war has damaged properties on both sides. Israel is facing a big labour shortage in the construction sector. The Indian workers were planned to be taken to Israel on "air shuttle", following a joint decision by the Israeli Prime Minister's Office, Finance Ministry and the Indian Construction and Housing Ministry on subsidized charter flights, a statement issued by the Israeli government had said.

The Indian government made no such statement probably to avoid a political controversy over the sensitive matter concerning India's diplomatic stance in the Israel-Hamas war killing thousands of innocent Palestinian children and women ahead of the parliamentary election. It is not clear if the Russian government also had a similar dialogue

with India on the subject of recruitment of Indians as "helpers" in the Russian Army. The recruitment process remains unclear in the absence of an official statement from either side.

According to a report, around 200 Indians are working with the Russian Army. However, the actual number could be much higher since the recruitment figure pertained to only the Moscow centre. Other Russian centres were also believed to have been involved in such recruitments. According to reports, young men from Nepal, India, Somalia and many other countries have found themselves in the Russian Army. It is said that workers undergo a psychometric test and are explained the job risks before they are sent for training. Depending upon the army command, under which they serve as helpers, the personal background of the workers is fully checked before dispatching them to the battlefield to ensure that they are not spies.

Recently, the Indian government said it was aware that "a few Indian nationals" had signed up for support jobs with the Russian Army. "The Indian embassy (in Moscow) has regularly taken up the matter with the relevant Russian authorities for their early discharge," said an official statement adding that "We urge all Indian nationals to exercise due caution and stay away from this conflict." The question is if the government is aware of the fact that the Russian Army is wrongly recruiting Indians why didn't it stop such recruitment in the very beginning, why the delayed reaction? What message does this give to a friendly country such as Russia and the rest of the world?

Russia is not the only country which recruits foreign nationals for armed forces. France, Denmark, Ireland and Israel are among the countries which recruit foreign citizens for their armed forces. The French Foreign Legion is the best example for an international army with soldiers from 140 countries. Incidentally, the Indian Army also recruits foreigners for its infantry, artillery and other branches. The recruits are Nepalese, Bhutanese nationals and Tibetan refugees. It also recruits persons of Indian origin who have migrated from Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Thailand, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Vietnam, with the intention of permanently settling in India.

As such, there is no reason why India should be touchy about jobless Indians wishing to serve the army of a friendly foreign country to support their families and have a livelihood. As a member of the United Nations, India had served peacekeeping forces in many conflict zones, especially in Africa. More than 2,00,000 Indian troops had served these forces. Over 160 Indian soldiers were killed in such missions under the UN flag as of September 2022.

Logically, there is no harm in serving a friendly foreign army under a bilateral or multilateral legal arrangement. It is a big threat to any nation. It is also an ultimate test of diplomatic friendship between or among nations drawn into a war. A nation engaged in war will recruit helpers only from such friendly nations which it can fully trust. Since the 1970s, Russia, formerly part of the Soviet Union, has been India's most trusted defence partner. (IPA Service)

"The human voice can never reach the distance that is covered by the still small voice of conscience."

— Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

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'Leaked' questions

SHAMELESSNESS is a common character with the political leadership. A lack of enforcement of accountability on the part of those in power and positions worsens the scenario. They, and the bureaucracy in tow, are a rule unto themselves and a shame on any civilized society. The low levels to which politics and governance have sunk are reflected starkly in the present cancellation of the UGC-NET test following a question paper leak. There's egg on the face of the National Testing Agency of the UGC, which had also bungled the common entrance test for B-Ed courses a week ago. That examination was also cancelled due to a question paper leak. These apart, the NEET Medical Entrance Examination too had a question paper leak and the case is now before the Supreme Court. Over 11 lakh applicants had written the UGC-NET test only to hear within a matter of hours that it has been cancelled — meaning, these educated youths will have to wait for a fresh exam and pass through the struggle of preparations again by burning the midnight oil.

The higher education system has been facing serious odds. Indian universities hardly find a mention in the global lists of top-100. Negligible numbers of foreign students come to this country for education, because the universities have no reputation for high standards. The flow of students is rather from India to foreign universities. This pathetic situation is despite the huge raise in the salaries of academicians since the 1990s. Now, a complaint is that academicians have lost their interest in teaching and are inclined more to "enjoying" material pleasures. The UGC as an institution and the education ministry too have let down the nation through perpetuation of nepotism and incompetence of the worst kind. They proved beyond doubt that they have no competence to even hold an entrance exam. This will have long-term adverse impacts on the nation's well-being itself.

It is no secret that the past 10 years of the Narendra Modi-led governance of the nation has left many areas untouched in the matter of periodic rejuvenation of the systems. It carried on by recourse to bluff and bluster and some welfare measures for the common man. The government is packed with incompetent hands. The way vested interests are allowed to hold sway over the education system and how faceless figures run the education ministry are both shameful and disgusting. The exam paper leaks are only a symptom of a deeper malady. These deeply hurt millions of educated youths aspiring for teaching posts and research in the universities. An investigation, or the matter being heard by the Supreme Court, might not mean much. The minister himself is a misfit.

Education in complete disarray in Meghalaya and the country

By Patricia Mukhim

To be a youngster in this country today is to go into a state of depression. Imagine the millions of aspirants for medical studies writing their NEET exams only to be told that there have been paper leaks in some states. The entrance exam to universities — CUET was itself held in a somewhat chaotic atmosphere leaving many students bamboozled and wondering whether they live in a country where things are being messed up by a political class — a large number of whom have dubious degrees and fake claims to scholarship. And then to add salt to already festering wounds is the sudden cancellation of the UGC-National Eligibility Test (NET). This exam is conducted to determine the eligibility of the candidate for the role of assistant professor or junior research fellowship or both, for Indian universities and colleges. The exam was previously conducted by the CBSE authorities that also carry out the Grade XII CBSE exams. However, now the rights for conducting all the exams from NEET to CUET to NET rests on the National Testing Agency (NTA).

Several young aspirants sat for this exam. I know of a few serious candidates who flew back all the way from Mumbai to be on time for the exams and put in their best efforts only to be told that the exam stands null and void because of paper leaks. How can such things be allowed to happen without any serious consequences against those responsible for the leak? Isn't there one thing that the NTA can do right and without causing so much distress?

It is important to delve into the genesis of the NTA. It is not a brainwave of the NDA Government. On the contrary its roots can be traced to the Programme of Action 1992, related to the National Policy of Education 1986, which mentioned conducting national-level common entrance tests to professional and non-professional programmes of study. The wheels started moving in 2010 with a report being submitted to the then Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) (now the Ministry of Education) by a Committee consisting of some directors of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), which recommended that the National Testing Agency be created by an Act of Parliament. The report mentioned that a statutory agency can ensure independence and transparency in

the testing of the magnitude that was being envisaged.

In 2013, the MHRD constituted a seven-member task force to prepare the blueprint for creating a special purpose vehicle to take the concept of the National Testing Agency (NTA) forward. This was following a decision made in April 2013 to set up the agency. The UPA Government was not able to take it forward from there. In 2017, the Union Finance Minister announced in the budget speech of 2017 that the NTA would become a reality. The Cabinet approved this decision to set up the NTA and Vineet Joshi was appointed the first Director-General of the agency. On 7 July 2018, the former Union HRD Minister Prakash Javadekar stated, during a press conference, that the NTA will be holding the Joint Entrance Examination—Main (JEE Main) and the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test—Undergraduate (NEET-UG) twice a year, and will also be holding the National Eligibility Test (NET), the Common Management Admission Test (CMAT) and the Graduate Pharmacy Aptitude Test (GPAT).

The NTA is administered by a governing body which includes a chairperson, a secretary and eight or more officials representing different national level institutes. It is claimed that only about 25-26 people are employed to manage this huge paraphernalia of activities which determine the future of so many of our youth. The NTA has had to deal with one scam after the other. In the NEET 2024 exams which had about 25 lakh aspirants, the question paper was leaked on May 5 in Patna (Bihar). Police claim that the gang involved in the paper leak allegedly took between Rs 30-50 lakhs from candidates and gave them question papers beforehand so they could memorise the answers. Interestingly, the results of the NEET exams were declared on June 4 when the results of the Lok Sabha elections were also announced. This when the NTA had said that the results would be declared on June 14.

Results of students scoring above 700 marks were published and went viral over the internet. Students and teachers were appalled as it was not possible to score such high marks in the NEET-UG due to the structure of the marking scheme. Candidates scoring

full marks went up from 2 in 2023 to about 69 in 2024. From the merit list uploaded on the public database by the NTA, it was also revealed that of those 69, scoring 720/720 marks, six took the exam from the same or nearby centres in the Jhajar town of Haryana.

This naturally created a furore among the student community, especially the genuine aspirants for medical studies. The NTA tried to explain away the discrepancies but not before many students and their parents approached the apex court. The NTA then adopted a normalisation formula devised and approved by the Supreme Court vide its judgment of June 13, 2018 to address the loss suffered by the candidates. Owing to this order, 1563 candidates were granted grace marks. The revised marks of those candidates varied from 20 to 720 marks. Again students complained that there was no notification in the examination brochures and the criteria on which the grace marks were allotted. A High Powered Committee was then set up to look into these disgraceful anomalies. The Committee recommended that the NTA should reconduct the NEET (UG) exam 2024 on June 23 for the 1562 candidates that had suffered 'time loss' during the originally scheduled exams on May 5, 2024 and who were awarded compensatory marks.

In such a situation one tends to agree with the Tamil Nadu Government which has resisted the conduct of NEET exams on the plea that it privileges students from urban backgrounds that can afford coaching. It is also not far-fetched to state that coaching centres for NEET have sprung up like mushrooms across the country and one wonders who gets a cut from such centres.

In such an abysmal situation when entrance exams to professional courses cannot even be conducted without any glitch, how do we expect those heading the Union Ministry of Education and the Education Departments in the state to be wise enough to provide an education system that is equal to the best in the world.

Ever since the NDA Government took over the reins of this country in 2014 there have been attempts to tinker with the syllabus and to bring in facets of history and science that point to a glorious past, but leave out the ugly

scars of such history. History is a statement of facts and gives the student an overview of life in that era as recorded by historians. There is a general suspicion that the historians of a certain era have been left leaning liberals and therefore have therefore given a skewed account of the past. I am all for a revision of textbooks but that should not be done because of political compulsions. The revision should be done in a critical and scientific manner and should be free from all biases. Those with political leanings — right, left or centre should steer clear of anything to do with rewriting, revising and critiquing text books. There is too much partisan politics in this country today which has seeped into every aspect of public life and is doing immense harm to the country.

As far as Meghalaya is concerned, students in schools following the MBOSE syllabi are in for a very bad time. The text books that are supposed to adopt the CBSE syllabus are still not ready and there is a general pandemonium about how the students are going to manage to learn all that needs to be learnt in such a short time. Teachers too are nonplussed but as is the normal state of affairs in Meghalaya, the parents and teachers are all sworn to silence. Elsewhere the parents would have held the government to account or gone to court on the matter. Instead, quite a good number of parents have shifted their children to Guwahati and those that can afford have shifted them to Bengaluru, Delhi, Chennai and elsewhere.

Managing the Education Department requires a breadth of knowledge and understanding that ordinary minds cannot grasp. The Chief Minister of Meghalaya would have been the best person to deal with Education but as usual in Meghalaya no minister wants to touch the Education portfolio with a barge pole. It is always dumped on the most unsuspecting scapegoat.

And just for public knowledge pray what has the State Education Commission been doing so far? What have been its most perspicacious recommendations till date? Don't we have the right to know? So please make the recommendations of the Commission public so that all the teachers and parents know where they are wading into and to make informed decisions.

The guards have received such stern orders from their superiors that even when there is heavy rain like these days they will just not allow any vehicles to use that road. What is the big deal that a public road is turned into an "army only" road? If the army does not want any "trespassers" to use that road then they should move to less congested areas and open up these areas for public convenience. The army cannot permanently station itself here in the heart of the town at the cost of the public here.

The army has been known to be stiff-necked about cantonment areas as if they are a breed apart and the Government has just bowed down to their royal wishes. It's high time that the State Government talks to the Defence Minister and get this road vacated so that some of the perennial traffic mess is solved.

Prompt intervention of the State Government in this respect is sought for in this matter. This same road was used in the past and the army got an alibi to prevent its use by the public after the Covid lockdown. How conveniently they have used the lockdown to assert their authority over "our land."

Yours etc.,
Jeniefer Dkhar,
Via email

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BJP-ruled states are epicentres of NEET paper leak scam Modi can't make head or tail of NEET, Dharmendra Pradhan is all at sea

By Krishna Jha

There is a clear direct connection of the Ministry of Education in the NEET exam paper leak. The Union Minister of Education Dharmendra Pradhan is not ready to resign. The matter has already reached the Supreme Court. The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for 2024 has stirred controversy across India, with allegations of a massive scam by the National Testing Agency (NTA). This year, over 23 lakh students faced challenges from paper leaks to questionable exam management, sparking nationwide debates and protests.

Amidst calls for a re-examination, many are questioning the integrity of the process, especially with incidents like the 67 students scoring a perfect 720, the mathematical anomalies in scores, and inconsistencies between OMR sheets and final results. Political figures and the public demand transparency and action, urging a thorough investigation into these grave issues affecting future medical professionals.

Since the release of NEET-UG-2024 results last week, the chorus regarding many malpractices related to the conduct of the exam

leak. But the police have made arrests after lodging FIRs. NTA's breach of the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act demands not an internal committee inquiry but warrants a credible external agency's investigation.

Our country has witnessed numerous medical admission rackets such as the VYAPAM scam in Madhya Pradesh and the All India Pre-Medical Entrance Test (AIPEET) in 2015. In all such admission tests, the exam conducting authority continued to deny malpractice allegations till the judiciary intervened. If NTA had given compensatory marks based on an established procedure, without compromising merit, the Committee's recommendation to cancel the results of these candidates creates doubts about the standards and fairness of the processing of NEET-UG results.

Since the release of NEET-UG-2024 results last week, the chorus regarding many malpractices related to the conduct of the exam



The Gujarat Police has arrested five people, including the Principal of Jalaram School in Godhra town in Gujarat's Panchmahal district, for allegedly trying to help students clear the NEET-UG examination. According to the police, the students were instructed to leave blanks on answer sheets for a teacher to complete later in a pay-for-pass plot.

The arrested accused include school teacher Tushar Bhatt, Parshuram Roy of Roy Overseas, an education consultancy firm, and Principal Purshottam Sharma. The district education officer reached the spot and upon checking Bhatt's phone found a list of 30 students. The officials also recovered Rs 7 lakh cash from his car. The arrests made in Bihar, Gujarat and Haryana clearly show that there has been organised corruption in the examination in BJP-ruled states, which had become the "epicentre" of paper leaks.

Following the arrest of the school principal and the teacher, the police arrested Roy and seized eight blank cheques and another set of cheques worth Rs 2.30 crore from him. The SP said many cheques were signed by the parents whose children had appeared in the NEET-UG exams at Jalaram School.

An engineer's confession and the mention of a 'Mantri Ji' has fuelled the NEET 2024 exam issue, involving the accommodation of candidates in Patna and a racket for leaking exam papers. In his confession note, the engineer, identified as Sikandar Prasad Yadavendu, claimed that he had assisted in finding accommodation for four NEET candidates and one guardian in Patna.

All of India is alarmed after learning about the NEET paper leaks. NEET aspirants are rattled and terrified. The Prime Minister of India is not educated. The Union Minister for Education has not done anything for education. The minister claims there was no exam paper

and processing of results has grown exponentially. Even the leaders of opposition parties raised concerns about the exam regarding the alleged malpractices. The parties demanded an enquiry and re-examination. The Supreme Court also raised apprehensions stating that the "sanctity of the exam has been affected" and demanded answers in an earlier hearing on June 11. It issued a notice to the National Testing Agency (NTA) and other respondents. New litigations are being filed in court on a daily basis demanding a re-test, and a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry.

When NEET was proposed, experts argued that a single national-level entrance test for medical courses would uphold merit and improve the quality of education. However, the experience of the past few years shows that it has not been the case at all. The results of NEET have caused a commotion in the whole country. Although 2.3 million students took this exam this year, it is not just about these 2.3 million students. It is about every student in the country who expects to get a fair chance to get admission in a good college. It is about every student in the country who thinks that by studying hard, she will have a bright future.

We all know that in our country, there is a lot of stress and pressure on students because of very tough competitions. There is a shortage or lack of good colleges in the country. There is a shortage or lack of seats in good colleges. And now the examinations that are being conducted to allocate those seats, if they are not conducted properly by the Testing Agencies and the government is sitting pretty, then what hope will be left for the future of the country? Paper leaks, or misconducting examinations, have become quite common. Candidates paid Rs 30 lakhs to 50 lakhs for the leaked papers. On May 10 the racket went bust. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Need for stronger customer support at MeECL

Editor,
Apropos my previous letter titled, "Is MeECL a liability for the consumer?", (ST, June 17), let me express my gratitude to the higher officials in MeECL for promptly addressing my inflated bill issue even during the Eid holiday. Hats off to their dedication! However, my effort is to highlight the plight of general consumers, especially the illiterate, whose complaints often go unnoticed or unaddressed, leading to prolonged suffering.

To alleviate such issues, it is my earnest request to the power house to set up a strong online customer care support system. I firmly believe that the corporation should not lag behind in this digital era; it should consider implementing features similar to those implemented by BSES Rajdhani, which provide online resolution of customer grievances, eliminating the need for physical visits to the power office and alleviating mental distress.

Well, if not all features, MeECL should at least introduce dedicated customer care services with live chat and email support. Aside from this, complaints raised through the existing Megha Power app should be promptly attended to before customers lose their power and their patience!

Moreover, it is also essential that the office staff whom customers often approach be solicitous, guiding and resolving grievances efficiently.

This request is made in the greater interest of aggrieved customers who have long suffered due to the inadequacies of MeECL's customer support system. I believe the improved customer service will not only enhance consumer satisfaction but also raise the reputation of MeECL as a responsive and responsible utility provider. This power corporation should not at all take away the sunshine from the hearts of its consumers.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

Criminal failure of Indian Railways

Editor,
Indian Railways have been playing with our lives by not filling up vacant posts and by forcing their personnel to overwork. Railway officials said that a preliminary probe into the recent fatal rail accident indicated that the loco pilot of the goods train disregarded the signal, which led to the Kanchenjunga Express accident.

Nidhu Bhushan Dutta, a permanent invitee-member of the All India Loco Running Staff Association and former working president of the Organisation, rightly

said, "We are surprised that the railway board chief accused the deceased loco pilot of overshooting the signal before any proper inquiry. Why didn't they fill the vacant posts? Why did they force train drivers to work beyond their capacity?"

An RTI reply says that of 1,27,644 sanctioned posts of loco pilots and assistant loco pilots, 18,766 — nearly 15 per cent — were vacant as of March 1 this year.

Two freight trains collided and hit a third on April 19, 2023 in Singhpur, Madhya Pradesh. A loco pilot was instantly killed. The loco pilot, Rajesh Prasad Gupta, had worked 14 to 15 hours of duty at a stretch when the accident took place. The Commissioner of Railway Safety Report observed that, most likely, the loco pilot became sleepy because of exhaustion, and as a result, the collision took place.

After the said accident in April 2023, three major train accidents took place within a span of one year and two months. A collision among three trains happened in Odisha's Balasore on June 2, 2023. That accident claimed 296 lives. Then two trains collided in Andhra Pradesh's Vizianagaram, killing 17 people on October 29. Now, the Kanchenjunga Express from Agartala to Sealdah got hit from behind by a goods train near Rangapani railway station on June 17.

Train Collision Avoidance System, later renamed as Kavach, is an automatic train protection system that helps prevent collisions if

two trains are on the same track. Had it been in place, it would have saved the collision between the Kanchenjunga Express and the goods train. Senior railway officials said that a field trial was started for Kavach in 2016. But it has been installed only in less than 1,500 km of tracks out of the total 70,000 km covered by the Indian Railways across the country. That means this life saving device has so far been placed in only a little over 2 per cent of railway tracks in eight years after its field trials!

Now, what is the reason? Railway officials said that the reason is high cost and technical challenges. What a joke! The cost is a factor when it comes to enhancing safety and saving human lives. But cost is not a factor for a glamorous bullet train project!

When we have a speedier alternative in air transport, there is no reason why Indian Railways must compete with airways. Railways cannot make their bullet ride a cheaper option than air travel. The government needs to make existing train journeys more punctual and safe instead of sweeping train safety under the carpet of bullet and Vande Bharat trains.

Kavach should immediately be installed in the rest of nearly 98 per cent of railway tracks. Plus, all railway vacancies must be filled up without any delay. It will be dangerous if train drivers are forced to do extra shifts. It will be equally dangerous if

there is a lack of manpower in the field of track inspections and maintenance.

Two things surprisingly coexist — a rise in unemployment and a fall in railway recruitment. It is a scandalous irony in a country that is rich in demographic assets.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Why are army authorities claiming rights over a public road?

Editor,
Traffic congestion is a daily phenomenon in Shillong and with the monsoons, traffic congestion is at its worst. It is indeed challenging for us lesser mortals to try to reach our destinations. For those of us coming from Oxford Hill and Last Stop when we reach Rhino Point, we are made to go all the way to Anjalae Petrol Pump (where the traffic is always at its peak) to again reach Rhino Point then proceed to our respective destinations.

If the Cantonment road (the one leading to Lady Keane College and Civil Hospital) can be opened to the general public during school hours and when it rains, it would really ease traffic congestion in that area to a great extent and allow us to reach our destinations on time. Unfortunately the army authorities prohibit vehicles from using that alternate route thereby adding to the traffic mess.

"I have the simplest tastes. I am always satisfied with the best."

—Oscar Wilde

The Shillong Times

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Whither Transparency in Governance

THAT the renowned Hotel Pine Wood, a legacy of the British, is sought to be renovated and its wood-work strengthened is a welcome step. But no public works can be carried out on the decision of a single individual in government. There is a process that ought to be followed and that process should be transparent and not give rise to speculations about who won the tender bid and under what circumstances. It is not understood as to why established procedures are given a go by. This has long been the story of contract works in Meghalaya. It is the reason why shoddy work whether of road construction or government infrastructure has become the bane of this State. It is unheard of that a contractor from this state is blacklisted, despite the scores of poorly constructed roads that barely last one season and projects that get into time and cost escalations.

That the renovation and redesigning work for Hotel Pinewood is sought to be done without consulting the Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) which oversees all tourism projects in the State is something that requires scrutiny. It is fair that members of the Board of the MTDC should raise questions on the manner that the contract work was allotted without their knowledge. As stated in the media, the renovation work will be funded by the Meghalayan Age Limited (MAL) but the process of tendering et al, should be the job of the MTDC. The timely intervention of the MTDC Board members has compelled the Tourism Department to now adopt a fair and transparent tendering process. What begs the question is why this process was not adopted earlier. The MAL is an arm of the Government as much as the MTDC is and one should not override the other. Even if MAL were to have within its ranks the expertise to execute the project the process should be seen to be transparent and MTDC should be in the know of this. There's no gainsaying that MAL has the capacity to get the best professionals to execute its works and the work should go to the firm with the technical know-how to complete what is a prestigious project – the makeover of a heritage Hotel. But why override the MTDC?

That the members of the MTDC only came to know of the project during a joint inspection where the Tourism Minister was also present is a serious lapse especially since a foreign architect was also consulted for the project. That no one could provide details of the components of the project and the total project cost is also enigmatic. These are unhealthy trends but they have also become the hallmark of the MDA-02 Government which is carrying forward its legacy of by-passing standard rules and procedures. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) regularly points to these anomalies but the Meghalaya Government gives it a wide berth. It is here that public vigilance is needed.

Solving Tribal Boundary Issues: The Ancestors' Way

By Fabian Lyngdoh

The Khasi who belong to the Austro-asiatic speaking peoples, are the first to enter into the hills and plains of North East India. For this reason, the present Khasi homeland is being encircled on all sides by various latter immigrants, all of whom belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of tribes. But in the past, there were no formal political boundaries between the neighbouring tribes. The Khasi ancestors had good trade relations with the Bengali in the south, and peaceful coexistence with the Garo, the Karbi, the Tiwa, the Rabha and Biate. There was no head hunting among the Khasis and the tribes surrounding them.

The Karbi who belong to the Kuki-Chin sub-family of the larger Tibeto-Burman group, are Khasi neighbours on the East. They migrated from the Kuki-Chin area in Myanmar and established their kingdom in the Diyung Valley with the capital at Maibang. The Kachari (Dimas) shifted their capital from Dimapur to Maibang and drove away the Karbi towards the Kupli river. The Karbi migrated to the hills, and entered into the Jaintia kingdom and lived under the Jaintia suzerainty. But fearing that their ethnic and cultural identity might be lost by the influence of the dominant Khasi matrilineal culture, majority of the Karbis migrated northward into the Rongkhang ranges, and established their kingdom in the 16th century, occupying a vast hilly portion of the Jaintia Hills and the entire Rongkhang plain with the capital at Socheng. Though there were minor clashes between the two tribes, but by and large they lived as peaceful neighbours.

The Garo who live on the west of the Khasi Hills also belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group. It is said that the Garo migrated from Tibet and entered into Koch Behar and settled there. But they were driven away and wandered into the Brahmaputra valley in Assam and settled there for about 400 years at a place today called Jogighopa. But they were again driven away towards the south by the king of that country. As they wandered towards Guwahati, they were enslaved and persecuted at the hands of the kings who ruled in the valley. It is said that a Khasi ruler helped their release and settled them in the neighbourhood of Boko. But as the place is said to be infested with tigers, the Garo moved away into the uncharted territory in the hills bordering the Khasi, and established their present homeland.

The Tiwa (Lalung) also belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group. The tribe is divided into Hills Tiwa and Plains Tiwa. The Hills Tiwa live in the Umswai valley as well as in the north-eastern

corner of Ri Bhoi. Formerly, the Hills Tiwa followed the matrilineal and matrilocal system as the Khasi, but there was gradual change to the patrilineal system under the influence of neighbouring patrilineal communities. The small kingdom of Gobha ruled by the Raja of a Tiwa clan, lies between the Ahom kingdom and the Jaintia kingdom. It was formerly under the Jaintia kingdom but later it had to acknowledge the Ahom supremacy under Jayadhwaj Singha as its overlord in 1659 A.D.

The Biate belong to the Hmar tribe which is part of the Kuki-Chin group of tribes. They are inhabiting the south-eastern part of Jaintia Hills and spreading into the other side of the Kupli river in North Cachar. The Pnar and Bhoi people call them 'Hadem'. Perhaps there was a time when the Hadem were quite a strong people. There are oral traditions among the elders in Ri Bhoi about

"The Garo who live on the west of the Khasi Hills also belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group. It is said that the Garo migrated from Tibet and entered into Koch Behar and settled there. But they were driven away and wandered into the Brahmaputra valley in Assam and settled there for about 400 years at a place today called Jogighopa."

'u syiem Hadem' (Hadem chief). There is a village in Ri Bhoi called 'Kor Hadem' (stone resting place of the Hadem) even today. There is also a story among the Pnar about a certain Hadem warrior called u Khongweng Myllep who terrorized the people of Raliang. Even the warriors of Jaintiapur could not defeat him until he voluntarily retreated to his own realm across the Kupli river. However, by and large the Biate have been living in peace in 29 villages in the Saipung area of Jaintia Hills.

When the British came, they established their headquarters in the Khasi Hills for their colonial rule over the whole of North East India (Assam Province). Shillong became the capital and the meeting place for all the tribal and non-tribal people of North East India. There was peaceful coexistence between various communities during the powerful British rule which stood as a common superior over them all. In 1947 this powerful common superior left the realm, and the peaceful coexistence began to break down. Assertion of tribal territorial and political identities began, leading to intermittent clashes between the different communities. Now we have nasty border disputes with Assam in the Block I and Block II areas as well as in the Langpoh area.

These border disputes sometimes led to violent clashes and deadly consequences. It is interesting to study how the Khasi ancestors solved boundary issues and lived in peace with the races and tribes surrounding them. The main factor was the adaptive character and the assimilative strength of the Khasi matrilineal system under the leadership of maternal uncles (avuncular leadership). The main identity of a Khasi male was that of a maternal uncle, and not that of a father. What is understood as 'u Rangbah' (respectable elder) applies to a Khasi man as a maternal uncle. With regard to the interrelationship with the plains people, Khasi men took non-Khasi women from the plains as their wives and converted the offspring into Khasi. That is how a great number of Khasi clans bearing the prefix 'khar' emerged. Non-Khasi men who married Khasi women had to cut off ties with their families of origin,

and became assimilated into the Khasi family and Khasi culture. That is the cultural buffer zone with regards to the people of the plains. In the west, the Khasi and Garo freely intermarried, thereby producing a unique subculture called 'Lynggam', which is a blend of both Khasi and Garo cultures. The Lynggam are genetically and culturally related to both the Khasi and the Garo. Their food and dress are similar to the Garo, but the language is more that of the Austro-asiatic Khasi. The marriage and funeral ceremonies of the Lynggam are like that of the Garo. The Lynggam believe that when a person dies, his/her soul shall not go to eat betel nut in the portico of God as the Khasi believe, but shall go to rest in eternal peace on 'u lum Pyndengrei' or 'u Lum Ngunrei' which is situated directly on the east of the Balpakram forest where the Garo too believe that the souls of their dead shall have eternal rest.

While marriage among the Khasi is initiated from the male side, for the Garo and the Lynggam, marriage is initiated from the female side. That is the cultural buffer zone on the western side which kept the Khasi and the Garo in peaceful coexistence. On the north-eastern border, the Khasi intermarried with the Karbi and the Tiwa, thereby producing a large number of new Khasi clans from Karbi and Tiwa ancestresses. When Karbi and Tiwa men married Khasi women they assumed Khasi surnames, and got absorbed as normal Khasi men. This part of the Khasi Hills came to be known as Ri Bhoi (Bhoi country). There are some political communities (Raids), established by the Karbi, the Rabha, and the Tiwa in the Ri Bhoi area long before British rule. These non-Khasi Raids are being recognized by the Dorbars of Hima Myliem and Hima Khyrim today, as in the past. This is the cultural buffer zone on the eastern border that kept the Khasi, the Karbi, the Rabha, and the Tiwa in peaceful coexistence. Similar socio-cultural phenomena must have taken place at the borders of Jaintia Hills.

Dr. B. Pakem pointed out that the patrilineal Biate have established marriage ties with the matrilineal Pnar of Jaintia Hills. Perhaps new matrilineal Pnar clans have emerged in Jaintia Hills through the marriage of Pnar men with women of the plains and women of other hill tribes. The world has changed; human population has grown, land has become not only a dwelling place but also a highly priced commercial commodity, political boundaries have been formally demarcated, and new governance systems have been adopted. Hence, there are bound to be conflicts. But violence is not the solution to conflicts. The Khasi ancestors solved their inter-tribal relations not through violence but through cultural adaptations and accommodations, while at the same time maintaining a very strong ethnic and cultural identity that could absorb and assimilate elements coming in contact with it.

No society can survive in isolation. Development and progress of any society depends to a large extent on the peaceful co-existence, mutual respect and mutual support it offers to, and receives from its neighbours around the borders and other communities far beyond the borders. Protective and defensive attitudes alone would not serve as a policy for ethnic and cultural security. Mutual suspicion and hatred, reciprocal harassment and violence would only create more insecurity that would hinder development and growth in all aspects of life. There had never been any violent conflicts between the Khasi and other neighbouring tribes or kingdoms, except ordinary skirmishes, which are natural when different communities live together side by side. Though the situations have changed, people of the present generation have to do likewise. The ancestors did not have the support of formal laws like we have today, but they could do it. With good will, we too can do it.

On the north-eastern border, the Khasi intermarried with the Karbi and the Tiwa, thereby producing a large number of new Khasi clans from Karbi and Tiwa ancestresses. When Karbi and Tiwa men married Khasi women they assumed Khasi surnames, and got absorbed as normal Khasi men. This part of the Khasi Hills came to be known as Ri Bhoi (Bhoi country). There are some political communities (Raids), established by the Karbi, the Rabha, and the Tiwa in the Ri Bhoi area long before British rule. These non-Khasi Raids are being recognized by the Dorbars of Hima Myliem and Hima Khyrim today, as in the past. This is the cultural buffer zone on the eastern border that kept the Khasi, the Karbi, the Rabha, and the Tiwa in peaceful coexistence. Similar socio-cultural phenomena must have taken place at the borders of Jaintia Hills.

Statistical estimation Good, bad & the misunderstood

By Rajiv Gupta

What public event has the active participation of 640 million people, with even a larger number of spectators? If you guessed the Indian general elections 2024, you are very correct. Nothing beats the Indian elections from the perspective of drama, emotions, debates, and just "tamasha." At the end of the seven week long exercise in democracy, before the results of the elections were announced, an added dramatic element was the announcement of the exit poll results. People eagerly awaited the results of the exit polls with almost the same fervour as they would the results of the actual election. Due to the fact that opinion polls during an election are not permitted in India, the exit polls are the first indication, right or wrong, about the possible outcome of the election.

Although exit polls are described as predictions, they are really a way of estimating the votes that have already been cast. Nothing can, or should, change the number of votes each individual or party has received. The only reason it is treated as a forecast is because the physical counting of the actual votes has not taken place. Exit polls are developed using statistical sampling. Statistical sampling is necessary when the population from which we sample is very large.

In the 2024 elections,

of taking a representative sample, or samples, all the more difficult.

The problem is compounded by the fact that what a pollster collects data on is not the number of seats won, but rather on the number of votes each political party is likely to receive. However, the relationship between vote share and the number of seats won is not straightforward. This can be seen in the fact that the Bhartiya Janata Party's vote share in the 2024 election was only slightly below its vote share in the 2019 election, 36.6 per cent versus 37.3 per cent, but it lost about 20 per cent of its seats between 2019 and 2024 (303 to 240). The conversion of the estimated vote share percentage into the estimated number of seats won presents a major source of error.

A third major source of error in estimation is the reluctance of some voters to reveal how they voted. This would be equivalent to a certain part of our earlier liquid container that was inaccessible for sampling. There could be several reasons for people refusing to respond to the pollster. They may be afraid that, if they voted against the expected majority party, they might be targeted for persecution. Or people may feel they do not wish to be bothered by pollsters.

The reluctance of some

"In the 2024 elections, approximately 640 million people voted at more than a million voting booths. So, the task for the pollsters is to determine a suitable sample to estimate how people have voted. Let us try to understand what can lead these estimates to be a true or incorrect reflection of the larger population they are attempting to describe."

approximately 640 million people voted at more than a million voting booths. So, the task for the pollsters is to determine a suitable sample to estimate how people have voted. Let us try to understand what can lead these estimates to be a true or incorrect reflection of the larger population they are attempting to describe.

The first issue to consider is the homogeneity of the population. Let us take a simple example. Consider a large container of a liquid in which some sugar is completely dissolved. If we wished to estimate the percentage of sugar in the liquid, we could take a small sample and evaporate the liquid to obtain the amount of sugar in the liquid. The percentage of sugar in the sample should be the same as in the large container because sugar has been dissolved completely and evenly. This would be an example of a homogeneous distribution of sugar in the liquid.

Now, instead of sugar that evenly dissolves in the entire liquid, we had a substance that partially dissolved in the liquid, while some of it remained suspended in a lumpy manner. Now, the problem of estimating the percentage of this substance in the liquid becomes complicated. The percentage of the substance in one part of the liquid is not necessarily the same as in any other part. So, in order to draw a sample, or samples, which reflect the distribution of the substance in the liquid, we will need to have some idea of that distribution.

Now add several more substances that are distributed unevenly in the liquid, and you can begin to appreciate the complexity of taking samples of exit polls. People with different identities including caste, religion, age, gender, region, and political allegiance are unevenly distributed in the country. In addition, the allegiance of the voters' changes over time. This makes the task

people to participate in the polling process, makes the sample non-random, which goes against the requirements for non-biased sampling. This can, and will, skew the results as it may exclude people who may have voted in one particular manner. Also, people in rural areas are wary of educated city folk asking questions and may even answer the questions incorrectly on purpose. This further exacerbates the problem.

While it is tempting to offer solutions to the problem of sampling, it is perhaps more meaningful to understand and accept that all statistics used in estimation have an inherent error. The more heterogeneous the population, the bigger the potential for error. The homogeneity/heterogeneity of the population can be affected by what we have tended to term as a political "wave" where more people cast aside their differences and vote in a more homogeneous manner.

In 2024, as some pollsters did predict, there was no political "wave." Perhaps the reason why the exit polls were more accurate in 2014 and 2019 was because of the Modi "wave." In the absence of a unifying theme or "wave," people assume their identities based on economic need, caste, region, age, religion, etc. The pollsters in India have increased their sample sizes from several thousands to several lakhs. But even that number is a drop in the bucket of an electorate of 640 million.

They have also tried to reformulate their sampling plans. But I feel that what is required is also an education of the media and of the general public in terms of what they should reasonably expect from the estimates the pollsters provide. Moreover, is it really so important to have an estimate of a count a couple of days before the actual count itself? Something for the nation to think about. --INFA

Letters to the Editor

We deserve better roads for the money spent!

Editor,
Much has been written and opinions given through this newspaper in the past on bad roads and poor road construction across the State, not to speak of rural roads. We are all concerned about public property and state assets, since roads are the lifeline and backbone of the economy. I will focus on this one road which was recently constructed. The recent double-laning of the Mawroh - Mawkyrnoh road leading up to ISBT Mawiong, which has been functional for over a year now is already showing signs of cracks and breakage leading to potholes in certain stretches. Thanks to the PWD Roads and the contractors who have shamelessly constructed a road lasting not more than one season! I

would once again point out as a lay person that the quality of work carried out is just 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, in Garo Hills, Assam etc. All I can say is this – they are of very 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 you can see the unevenness, especially at night when the lights are on. Smoothness is a concern because the thickness of the bitumen is very poor. The uppermost layer should have been 6 inches or more thick to make it last longer, be smoother and bear the load of heavy vehicles. We do not know who the contractors are who have undertaken this important task. This road is already very busy and traffic is heavy due to road

diversion as a result of the Umiam Dam repair work. I do not know how long the road will last. All I know is that we the public would be the losers and sufferers in the future. I request the PWD Roads to please conduct a proper spot inspection and supervision to oversee the potholes, breakage and the quality of work and conduct immediate repairs before the road further worsens. Moreover such roads need paved shoulders and some footpaths to allow people to walk alongside.

We do not know what is the total component of this particular road. It is surprising that no proper signage is provided along the road. All we want to see are good quality roads in our Shillong city and not substandard roads in the future.

Across Shillong, roads are in a very bad shape. All we have to say is blame it on the weather and the rain. Can't our dear engineers

have knowledge that rain is a part of this country and this state in particular? If the roads constructed during the British and Assam time can withstand the test of time, why can't we have such roads today when modern technology is ever present? Whether you drive in a new or old car, the roads will shake and jolt your car. Constant repairs and patch work annually or bi-annually has damaged the smoothness and quality of the roads. It is requested in public interest that good roads be constructed to make our city proud.

I hope our respected leaders under the present Government will deliver the work to at least make Shillong worthy of being called a Smart City. This is written in public interest and not to criticise or offend anyone. As a concerned citizen I am only sharing my views.

Yours etc.,
Reward Rymbai,
Shillong-2

Delay in declaration of results by Secretariat Administration Dept

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I would like to bring to the notice of the general public that the Secretariat Administration Department, Government of Meghalaya, had floated an advertisement on February 9, 2022, calling for applications from eligible candidates for filling up various categories of Grade IV posts. Subsequently, after a gap of almost two years, the Screening Test for the aforementioned posts was finally conducted on January 27, 2024 in various examination centres throughout the state. However, it is disheartening to state that the results of the Screening Test have not yet been declared and made public even to this

day, despite a delay of over four months. This is a cause of great concern, as it casts aspersions on the entire recruitment process. Using the OMR Answer Sheets there should in fact be no delay of a month or two between the examination and the declaration of results as it is easy to assess and compute the final results. We request the Cabinet Minister in charge Secretariat Administration Department and the concerned IAS officers manning the Department to please show some mercy on the common people and to declare the results forthwith.

Yours etc.,
Shemborki K. Jahrin,
Mawkyrwat Village,
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.

How would a switch to nuclear affect electricity cost for households and industry

Peter Dutton has announced that under a Coalition government, seven nuclear power stations would be built around the country over the next 15 years.

Experts have declared nuclear power would be expensive and slow to build.

But what might happen to energy prices if the Coalition were to win government and implement this plan? How might we estimate the cost of nuclear? By 2035, 50-60% of the existing coal-fired fleet will very likely have been retired, including Vales Point B, Gladstone, Yallourn, Bayswater and Eraring - all of which will have passed 50 years old.

These five generators contribute just over 10 gigawatts of capacity. It's probably not a coincidence that the seven nuclear plants proposed by Dutton would also contribute roughly 10 gigawatts in total if built.

Neither my team at Monash University nor the Australian Energy Market Operator has run modelling scenarios to delve into the details of what might happen to electricity prices under a high-uptake nuclear scenario such as the one proposed by the Coalition. That said, we can make some broad assumptions based on a

metric known as the "levelised cost of electricity".

This value takes into account: How much it costs to build a particular technology How long it takes to build

The cost to operate the plant its lifetime And very importantly, its capacity factor.

Capacity factor is how much electricity a technology produces in real life, compared with its theoretical maximum output.

For example, a nuclear power station would likely run at 90-95% of its full capacity. A solar farm, on the other hand, will run at just 20-25% of its maximum, primarily because it's night for half of the time, and cloudy some of the time.

CSIRO recently published its GenCost report, which outlines the current and projected build and operational costs for a range of energy technologies.

It reports that large-scale nuclear generated electricity would cost between A\$155 and A\$252 per megawatt-hour, falling to between A\$136 and A\$226 per megawatt-hour by 2040.

The report bases these costs on recent projects in South Korea, but

doesn't consider some other cases where costs have blown out dramatically.

The most obvious case is that of Hinkley Point C nuclear plant in the United Kingdom. This 3.2GW plant, which is being built by French company EDF, was recently reported to be now costing around £34 billion (about A\$65 billion). That's about A\$20,000 per kilowatt.

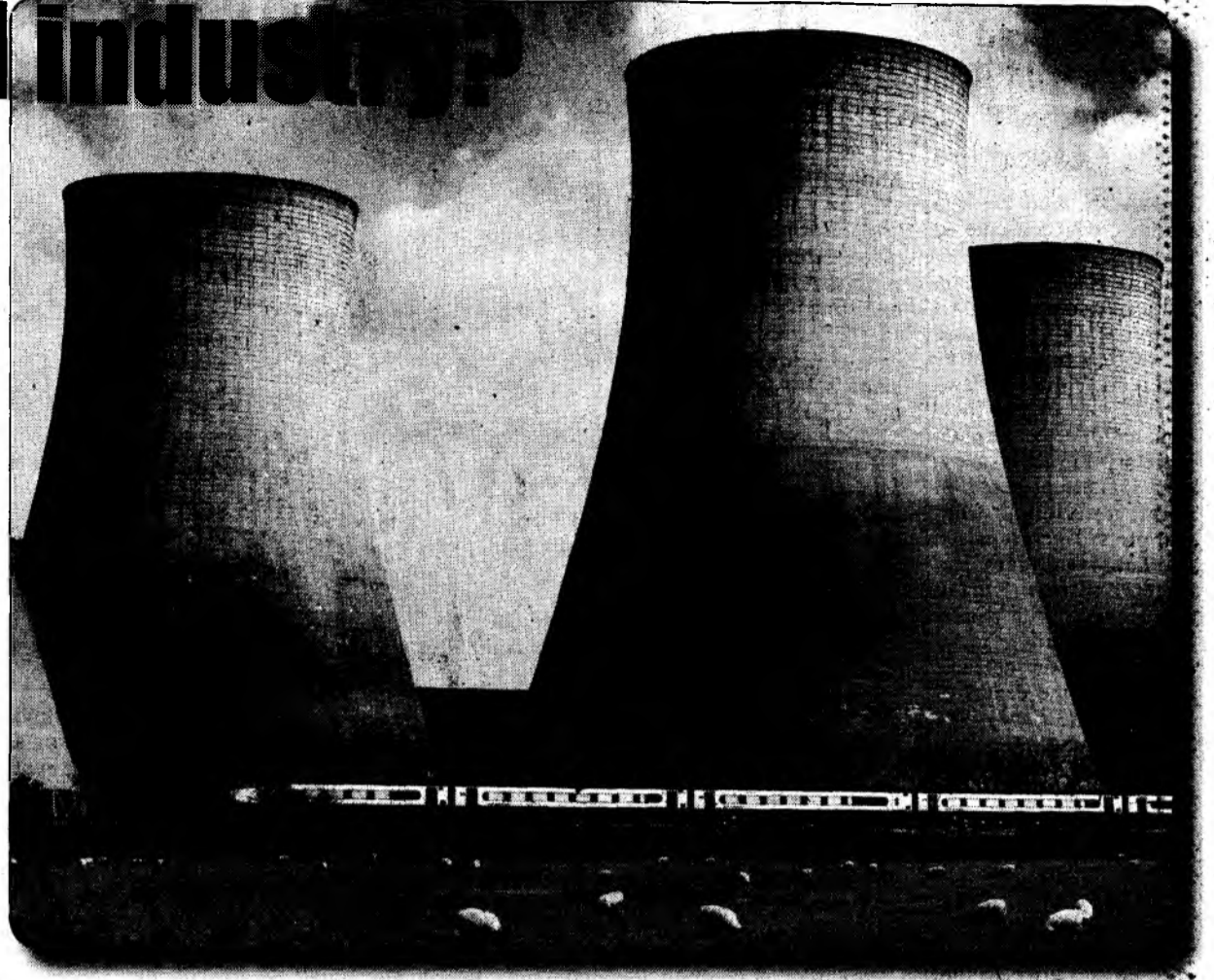
CSIRO's GenCost report assumed a value of \$8,655 per kilowatt for nuclear, so the true levelised cost of electricity of nuclear power in Australia may end up being twice as expensive as CSIRO has calculated.

Another factor not accounted for in the GenCost assumptions is that Australia does not have a nuclear industry. Virtually all the niche expertise would need to be imported.

And very large infrastructure projects have a nasty habit of blowing out in cost - think of Snowy 2.0, Sydney's light rail project, and the West Gate Tunnel in Victoria.

Reasons include higher local wages, regulations and standards plus aversion from lenders to risk that increases cost of capital. These factors would not bode well for nuclear.

In CSIRO's GenCost report, the



levelised cost of electricity produced from coal is \$100-200 per megawatt-hour, and for gas it's \$120-160 per megawatt-hour. Solar and wind energy work out to be approximately \$60 and \$90 per megawatt-hour, respectively. But it's not a fair comparison, as wind and solar are not "dispatchable" but are dependent on the availability of the resource.

When you combine the cost of a mix of wind and solar energy and storage, along with the cost of getting the renewable energy into the grid, renewables end up costing \$100-120 per megawatt-hour, similar to coal.

If we were to have a nuclear-based system (supplemented by gas to meet the higher demands in the mornings and evenings), the costs would likely be much higher - potentially as much as three to four times if cost blowouts similar to Hinkley Point C were to occur (assuming costs were passed on to electricity consumers. Otherwise, taxpayers in general would bear the burden. Either way, it's more or less

the same people).

But what about the impact on your household energy bill? Well, here the news is marginally better.

Typical retail tariffs are 25-30 cents per kilowatt-hour, which is \$250-300 per megawatt-hour. The largest component of your energy bill is not the cost of generation of the electricity; rather, it's the cost of getting the power from the power stations to your home or business.

In very approximate terms, this is made up of the market average costs of generation, transmission and distribution, as well as retailer margin and other minor costs. The transmission and distribution costs will not be significantly different under the nuclear scenario compared with the current system. And the additional transmission costs associated with the more distributed nature of renewables (meaning these renewable projects are all over the country) is included in the estimate.

According to my back-of-the-envelope calculations, your retail tariff

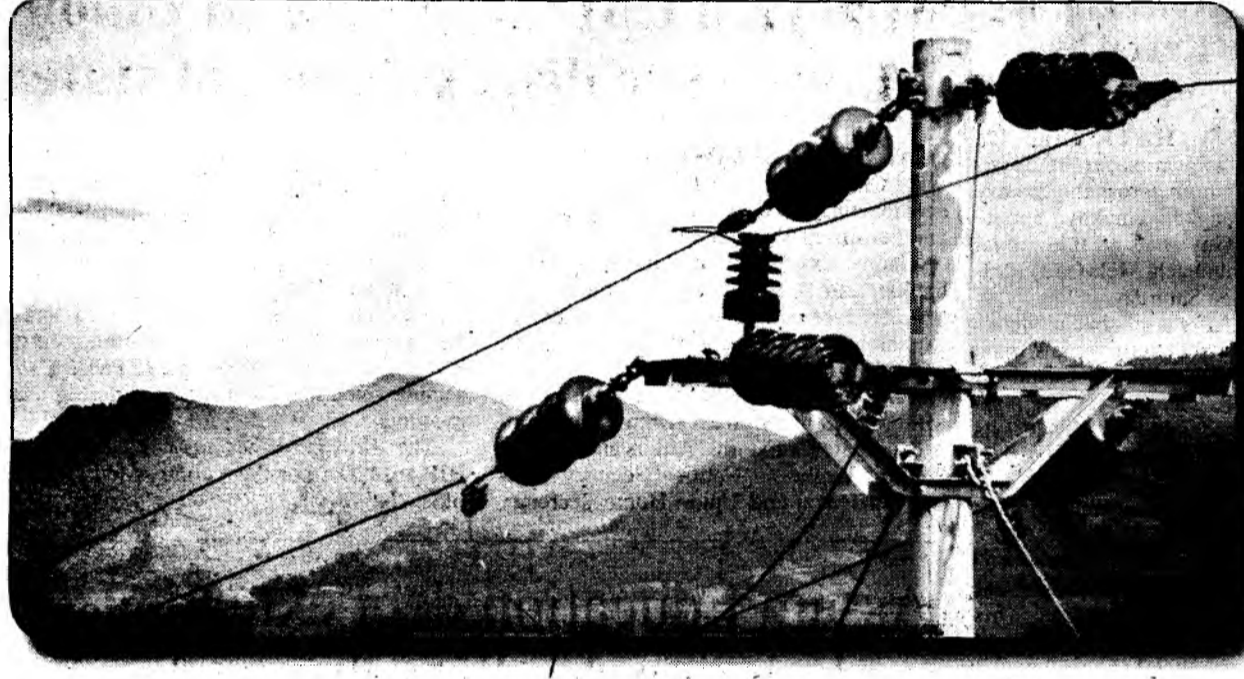
under the nuclear scenario could be 40-50c per kilowatt-hour.

But if you are a large energy consumer such as an aluminium smelter, you pay considerably less per kilowatt-hour as you don't incur the same network or retailer costs (but the cost of generating electricity in the first place makes up a much bigger proportion of the total cost).

So if the cost of electricity generation soars, this hypothetical aluminium smelter's energy costs will soar too.

This would be a severe cost burden on Australian industry that has traditionally relied on cheap electricity (although it's been a while since electricity could be described as cheap).

A likely increase in energy costs. In summary, in a free market, it is very unlikely nuclear could be competitive. But if a future Coalition government were to bring nuclear into the mix, energy costs for residential and especially industrial customers would very likely increase. (The Conversation)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, June 23, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Rahu on your solar return chart. It is going to be a very difficult year for you which will bring mixed results. Money inflow will be continuous and you will take investment related decisions wisely. You may even think of selling your old property and buying a new one. But it will be not an easy decision. You will face problems at your workplace. There will be differences of opinion with your colleagues and they will refuse to see your point of view. Even your bosses will expect a lot from you and will not be satisfied with your performance. At times you will have conflicts with them too. And you will face stressful situations. But you need to remain calm and composed.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are able to integrate forces, resources and professional aspects to achieve success in important business ventures. With the expertise that you possess in your field, you achieve goals and targets on time. This is an exceptionally exciting time as challenging professional and business opportunities are offered to you. Deep personal relationships and business partnerships are likely to get closer. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. You could be impatient in love and relationships as you are overflowing with energy.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would be more accommodative and compassionate in professional and personal relationships. Friendship, cooperation and synergy are available and you enjoy the association of your loved ones. An opportunity for career advancement, a promotion or gainful business opportunity may be offered. Even though possibilities and horizons open up, you tend to think negatively and imagine the worst. You may feel oppressed by too much work. It is the best time to share and delegate work and not to carry the entire burden yourself. Guard against over indulgence in food, drink or work.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would be most successfully doing tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocity. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. A new cycle begins with the old order finishing as inner and outer changes are on the cards. Health problems are resolved and your energy is restored.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) There is good luck attending to material matters, as there is increase of wealth and monetary gains. This is the right time to share your loving and personal relationships and share thoughts and ideas and spend good time in the association of your loved one. Practical details are to be dealt with clarity and efficiency. You may be involved in meetings with business associates as financial and business dealings would bring good results and gains. You can count on your professional and personal partners, as they stand by you through thick and thin. You will work in free and unrestricted space. Physical energy and good health allow you to tackle busy schedules.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. Economy at home and management of business and work are important issues of the week. You connect with new people and discuss important business matters. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and profit. Your professional skills, wisdom and craft are appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of affection and friendship around you. You could be attracted to new people and ideas as you are open and receptive. But you must conserve your financial resources for priorities that have to be met at the end of the week. You would be able to complete work assignments and personal business with good energy and support.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) The unpredictable is likely to happen that too when you least expect it. Surprises are in store for you in professional and personal matters. It would be best to be open and receptive in personal relations and family situations. A flexible approach in the work area is recommended. New people may come into your life and influence your decisions and direction. Creative opportunities should not be ignored as it is

likely to bring substantial professional material gain. While you work on one project another suddenly gains more importance and demands more attention. A financial windfall is possible as some dues come to you after a period of time. Don't be thrown by new developments. You could be depleted of resources and forces if you don't manage them properly. Meditation and spiritual pursuits can be rewarded and worth pursuing.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase opens up a world of romance and love in personal relations. You are gracious with family and children. You would express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner and influence people in authority. There could be alteration in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be lead away by enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Commercial transactions and business deals could be conducted effectively. Money matters take priority as some unexpected expenditures have to be met. End of the phase brings fresh energy, love and romance in important relationships.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Good luck in finances and opportunities is encouraging. You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine good luck and good management. You share some memorable moments with a loved one. You would express your views and comments without fear of losing a contract and manipulate well to turn things in your favor. Luxury shopping may make a hole into your pocket but makes your family happy and cheerful. It would be good to say what you feel as you would be appreciated for your honesty. You are restless and may incorporate changes albeit small ones in your lifestyle and image.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You are bold, courageous and frank while dealing with controversial and professional matters. You are likely to meet high profile people and share ideas and spend some time in their association. A wonderful professional opportunity takes you towards success. Good planning and management lead to progressive and productive ventures. A chance meeting will lead to romance, love and even a long lasting relationship. You may take a short break before starting on a new project to renew your energy. You are able to achieve a lot at home and at work with your youthful energy.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration indicates that there is conflict within and discord outside. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms on a compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may disagree on a point of view with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Emotions and mood can swing to extremes and it is important to achieve equilibrium. It would be wiser to face difficult people and situations rather than escape as there would be victory and success in professional ventures. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You have the ability to stand alone. You are independent, creative, original, ambitious, determined and self-assured. Adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards life would bring harmony at home. This period proves to be good for the people in show business and in a creative line. Professionally huge expenses as well as financial gains from foreign business associates are foretold. You would have good support from family members and business associates. You feel touchy and sensitive with your romantic partner.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. Your suave ways go down well with many. You stand at crossroads while making an important decision whether it is professional or personal. It would be better to listen to our own good judgment and do what is good for you especially as people around you could be judgmental or manipulative. Do not forget to share your feelings with the one who loves and cares for you. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than trust upon others. A relaxed and light attitude would help to overcome negative thoughts.

The 3.2 mn-yr-old Lucy fossil and revelation about nudity, shame

By Stacy Keltner

Fifty years ago, scientists discovered a nearly complete fossilized skull and hundreds of pieces of bone of a 3.2-million-year-old female specimen of the genus *Australopithecus afarensis*, often described as "the mother of us all." During a celebration following her discovery, she was named "Lucy," after the Beatles song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." Though Lucy has solved some evolutionary riddles, her appearance remains an ancestral secret. Popular renderings dress her in thick, reddish-brown fur, with her face, hands, feet and breasts peeking out of denser thickets. This hairy picture of Lucy, it turns out, might be wrong. Technological advancements in genetic analysis suggest that Lucy may have been naked, or at least much more thinly veiled.

According to the co-evolutionary tale of humans and their lice, our immediate ancestors lost most of their body fur 3 to 4 million years ago and did not don clothing until 83,000 to 170,000 years ago. That means that for over 2.5 million years, early humans and their ancestors were simply naked. As a philosopher, I'm interested in how modern culture influences representations of the past. And the way Lucy has been depicted in newspapers, textbooks and museums may reveal more about us than it says about her.

FROM NUDITY TO SHAME

The loss of body hair in early humans was likely influenced by a combination of factors, including thermoregulation, delayed physiological development, attracting sexual partners and warding off parasites. Environmental, social and cultural factors may have encouraged the eventual adoption of clothing.

Both areas of research - of when and why hominins shed their body hair and when and why they eventually got dressed - emphasize the sheer size of the brain, which takes years to nurture and requires a disproportionate amount of energy to sustain relative to other parts of the body.

Because human babies require a long period of care before they can survive on their own, evolutionary

interdisciplinary researchers have theorized that early humans adopted the strategy of pair bonding - a man and a woman partnering after forming a strong affinity for one another. By working together, the two can more easily manage years of parental care.

Pair bonding, however, comes with risks. Because humans are social and live in large groups, they are bound to be tempted to break the pact of monogamy, which would make it harder to raise children.

Some mechanism was needed to secure the social-sexual pact. That mechanism was likely shame.

In the documentary "What's the Problem with Nudity?" evolutionary anthropologist Daniel M.T. Fessler explains the evolution of shame: "The human body is a supreme sexual advertisement. Nudity is a threat to the basic social contract, because it is an invitation to defection. Shame encourages us to stay faithful to our partners and share the responsibility of bringing up our children." Boundaries between body and world

Humans, aptly described as "naked apes," are unique for their lack of fur and systematic adoption of clothing. Only by banning nudity did "nakedness" become a reality.

As human civilization developed, measures must have been put in place to enforce the social contract - punitive penalties, laws, social dictates - especially with respect to women.

That's how shame's relationship to human nudity was born. To be naked is to break social norms and regulations. Therefore, you're prone to feeling ashamed. What counts as naked in one context, however, may not in another. Bare ankles in Victorian England, for example, excited scandal. Today, bare tops on a French Mediterranean beach are ordinary.

When it comes to nudity, art doesn't necessarily imitate life.

In his critique of the European oil painting tradition, art critic John Berger distinguishes between nakedness - "being oneself" without clothes - and "the nude," an art form that transforms the naked body of a woman into a pleasurable spectacle for men. Feminist critics such as Ruth Barcan complicated Berger's distinction between nakedness and the nude, insisting that nakedness is already shaped by idealized representations.

In "Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy," Barcan demonstrates how nakedness is not a neutral state but is laden with meaning and expectations. She describes "feeling naked" as "the heightened perception of temperature and air movement, the loss of the familiar boundary between body and world; as well as the effects of the actual gaze of others" or "the internalized gaze of an imagined other." Nakedness can elicit a spectrum of feelings - from eroticism and intimacy to vulnerability, fear and shame. But there is no such thing as nakedness outside of social norms and cultural practices.

LUCY'S VEILS

Regardless of her fur's density, then, Lucy was not naked.

But just as the nude is a kind of dress, Lucy, since her discovery, has been presented in ways that reflect historical assumptions about motherhood and the nuclear family. For example, Lucy is depicted alone with a male companion or with a male companion and children. Her facial expressions are warm and content or protective, reflecting idealized images of motherhood.

The modern quest to visualize our distant ancestors has been critiqued as a sort of "erotic fantasy science," in which scientists attempt to fill in the blanks of the past based on their own assumptions about women, men and their relationships to one another. In their 2021 article "Visual Depictions of Our Evolutionary Past," an interdisciplinary team of researchers tried a different approach. They detail their own reconstruction of the Lucy fossil, bringing into relief their methods, the relationship between art and science, and decisions made to supplement gaps in scientific knowledge.

The veiled Lucy speaks to the complex relationships among nudity, covering, sex and shame. But it also casts Lucy as a veiled virgin, a figure revered for sexual "purity." And yet I can't help but imagine Lucy beyond the cloth, a Lucy neither in the sky with diamonds nor frozen in maternal idealization - a Lucy going "Ape-shit" over the veils thrown over her, a Lucy who might find herself compelled to wear a Guerrilla Girls mask, if anything at all. (The Conversation)

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"When you practice gratefulness, there is a sense of respect toward others."

—Dalai Lama

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Hindujas and justice

A developed nation is materially different from an under-developed one. In several cases, the difference could be as vast as the distance between the South Pole and the North Pole. So too with the justice dispensation systems in the developed West and in India. India remains a chaotic democracy with its loose systems that appears to worsen by the day, thanks to poor governance.

Take, for instance; the verdict passed by a Swiss court in Geneva, Switzerland, this past week, on Indian-born Hindujas, Britain's wealthiest family with assets of nearly \$50 billion. The court has sentenced four of the family members, including two women, for jail terms of four or more years on charges that they maltreated four domestic servants brought from native India. Charges were that they paid a pittance as salary, confined them to the home for long periods without allowing them movement, etc. A question that arises is, whether any prominent individual or family in this country ever faced such court verdicts even for worse crimes. Juxtapose this query with complaints that the justice dispensation systems – including the police and courts – impose their weight solely on the poor, the disadvantaged, the weak and the powerless. This is the irony of the situation. India has all the laws but hardly ever are high-profile individuals, be they businessmen, bureaucrats or politicians, sentenced to jail terms. Exceptions were a few like Lalu Prasad Yadav, who too spent most of his jail term in "hospitals" – a euphemism for a luxurious living for a convict outside of prison cells. The overall scenario had never been good, and it worsened in the last 10 years of the Narendra Modi-led NDA government's term.

The central enforcement agencies, including the ED, the CBI, the Vigilance, Anti-Corruption wings and the police drag investigations to hopelessly long terms while corrupt officials make hay and delay or even deflect the course of justice. Courts keep arguing cases for long years, and in the end, punishment is often the first casualty. Entire governmental systems are getting more and more corrupt, ineffective; and like Nero, those who run the government at the apex look the other way. They do not treat it as their business to set things right. The beginning of the 1990s saw economic reforms, which ended the socialist raj, and the national economy started growing faster. This should have been followed by reforms in other sectors, but very little has happened other than the market reforms in the name of GST. Labour laws are not followed and no one dares complain. The ten years of the Modi government is noted for an absence of concerted actions on multiple fronts other than the infrastructure sector. Winning an election by itself cannot entitle a dispensation to a "good-service entry" in the performance records.

Khasi Language: Challenges beyond the 8th Schedule

By HH Mohrmen

There is so much talk about the Khasi language getting recognition under the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. Getting the necessary recognition is one thing, but is that all? Apart from not getting the necessary recognition, promoting this ancient language has other challenges. In fact, there are challenges in promoting the language even among its speakers.

Fined for Using English Terms While Speaking in Khasi

One of the music videos that went viral in the last few months is a humorous one titled "Shah Phai San Tyn-gka," which literally means "fined five rupees." The aptly titled video was made by renowned musicians from the West Khasi Hills, including Jophas Thongni, Desmond R. Sunn, and Damian Jyrwa, and it is about a trip they took from Nongstoin to Shillong. The video is not about the trip per se but about what happened during the long journey.

The music video tells a story about the horrible journey the travelers took in the summer of 2008 when the road to Nongstoin was in terrible condition, and it took them an awfully long time to reach their destination. To while away the time, they decided to play a game challenging each other to speak Khasi correctly. The competition was to see if there was anyone among them who could speak Khasi without using English or Khasi-adapted English words (if there is such a thing). Can we really speak Khasi without using a single English word? That was the challenge. At the end of the journey, everybody was fined because each and every one of them used English or Khasi-adapted English words while conversing.

Borrowing Words in the Past

Sure we must have lived on these hills for a long time at one point or another; we must have interacted with the plains people so it is no surprise that we borrowed words from the language of our neighbours. A few words that one can mention are terms like "Dorbar from Dar-bar," "Rong" from "Rang," and even "Rajj" or "raid" is obviously borrowed. "Nurok ka ksew" from "Narak," "kharai" from "Khadai," "tala" for lock, "poisa" from "paisa," and there are dozens of words borrowed from the languages our neighbours in the plains, who in turn bor-

rowed from Urdu. Hindi too is not a pure language.

At a later period of time, we interacted with the British and we started borrowing words from English, which we sometimes adapted to make them sound like Khasi words. A few examples of words in this category are "Ketli" from kettle, "staying" from steering, "Kiar" from gear, "tiphin" from Tiffin, and "huk" from hook. The accepted term for election in Khasi is "tlekshon," pronounced as we spell the term in Khasi. There are many more such examples of foreign words or terms borrowed from other cultures and used in Khasi.

The reason we borrow words from other cultures is that the items or ideas we encountered were foreign, hence new to our culture. Because the terms or ideas, are alien to our culture, we have no words for them and thus have to borrow the words from the culture that the items or ideas came from. The problem is if we continuously borrow words or terms from other languages, there will come a time when the language will be flooded with foreign words or terms.

Writing the Khasi Dialects

To this day, there is apprehension in some sections of society against writing the different Khasi dialects. There is fear that if people start writing in their respective dialects, it will adversely impact the commonly accepted Sohra form of the Khasi language which is generally used for writing and speaking. There is a fear that if people start writing in their dialects, it will create fissures between people, which will ultimately lead to division within the tribe and may even lead to communal hatred.

The Khasi language is fortunate in that it has many dialects, which include War Jaintia/Amwi, Pnar, Bhoi, Maram, and War Khasi, which people who live in different regions of the state still speak. The dialects are still being spoken by their respective speakers, so what is the issue of putting it into writing?

In the past, when words and terms were borrowed from other languages, there was no effort to see if there was already an alternative in the different Khasi dialects. We replaced "hook" and "tala" by using the same

terms from the borrowed language when we already have "tjwang" in Pnar, which means hook and lock at the same time. This happens because we do not look for words or terms that are available in the dialect.

If we use words from other dialects, it will help enrich the spoken or written Khasi Sohra language. For example, for "itkhmih," which means mirror, the same is called "ka Ab" in Pnar. The term for egg is very interesting; in Khasi, "ka Pyleng" is also known as "ka Lalun," "ka Hunsyi," and "ka Thmat" in the War Amwi dialect. So if we take all the dialects into consideration, we have four terms for egg. In Khasi, we do not have an equivalent word to translate boomerang, but in Pnar, it is known as "ka Lapakhot." Similarly, for pan or betel leaf, we have "Tjempew" in Khasi, "Pathi/Pathai" in Pnar and War, and "Lakor" in War Khasi. The War Khasi also provides us with an alternative for truth "Chynnam" "ka jingshishah" in Khasi and also for "Nongshohnoh," and the word is "Sam-at." I do not find a word for slow loris in Khasi Sohra, but in War Jaintia, it is known as "Khaprang." Nepenthes Khasiana is known as "Tiew rakot" in Khasi, but in Pnar, it is known as "syntu tymoh phare." The point is, if we are open to using terms or words from other dialects, we have ample alternatives from our own language.

Writing the dialects will help enrich the spoken Khasi Sohra language and at the same time, it will strengthen and sustain the dialects spoken by the people in the different regions of the state. In the recently held meeting of the Khasi Authors' Society, Dr. D.R. Nonglait, the president of the organization, was open to the idea of putting the different Khasi dialects into writing. However, writing the dialects also presents many challenges, and one very obvious challenge is the alphabets.

Challenge of Writing Different Dialects

The first and immediate challenge of putting the dialects into writing is the fact that the present Khasi alphabet that we have are not enough because they do not represent some of the sounds spoken in some of the dialects. For example, to write Pnar, we have some

sounds like 'ae' and 'chi,' which are not represented by any of the alphabets used in Khasi now. "Ae" is used in words like "alae," which means come, and "chi" is used in "chiboon," which means many. Perhaps to write "ae" in Pnar, we do not need to include another alphabet; just combining the two existing alphabets 'a' and 'e' will be sufficient. However, there is no representation of "chi" in the list of existing alphabets. We also need a representation of another sound if we are to write in War Jaintia, and that is the 'gi' sound, which is used in "gi" as in cooked rice or "ja" in Khasi and "giang," which means uncle or Ma in Pnar.

I believe it is important to write the different dialects because they are like streams that can feed the river, which is the common Khasi language used by all. The common Sohra Khasi is like a bridge that connects all the people of the same ethnic identity.

Invasion of Western Culture

The world is changing, and everything is changing at a very fast pace. People are bombarded with words, terms, and even ideas that are new and have no representation in our vocabulary. In other words, there is an invasion of terminologies and words from all directions that are alien to the culture. For example, we use chairs and tables and no longer use "lyngknot" or "mula." The gas stove is replacing "dpei," heater "chawla" and the mixer and grinder are replacing "maw jingshoh" or "thlong." When traditional utensils or tools are no longer used, the terms also die with the changes. New tools that we are using also find no translation. For example, for mobile phones, we simply write "mobai," or USB is USB, laptop is laptop, and it is only for computer that I was able to come up with "korporat." The challenge is there are going to be many more new terms, even in English, like artificial intelligence, cloud computing, data science, and agroecology to name a few. The question is, how are we going to counter this invasion?

No readership for Khasi

The biggest challenge is the lack of interest among the people in reading Khasi books. Ask any author, and they will tell you that one writes out of love for the language only. That is the crux of the problem.

to control inequality.

Thomas Piketty has aptly called progressive inheritance taxes the "second major fiscal innovation of the twentieth century," after progressive income taxes. Inheritance tax is 55 per cent in Japan, 50 per cent in South Korea, 45 per cent in France, 40 per cent in the USA and the UK, 34 per cent in Spain, 33 per cent in Ireland, and 30 per cent in Belgium and Germany. Those countries spend the money to ensure that every citizen gets quality health care and quality education.

Unfortunately, we follow an indirect tax regime in a country where rising inequality is a pain in the neck. In India, the poorest of the poor have to cough up a substantial amount and an equal amount of indirect tax as their creamy counterparts when they are to buy anything from salt to slippers and from food to medicine.

As a matter of fact, if we calculate the percentage of indirect tax payment on one's total income, we will see that a poor man's contribution to tax and tax related expenditures is more than any rich person. This is because a poor person has to spend all his money to buy essential items and thus has to pay GST. A poor person's contribution towards GST in proportion to her or his income is naturally higher than that of a rich person.

While direct taxes depend on the taxpayers' ability to pay, indirect taxes are blind to the economic status of the

taxpayers. In this way, indirect taxes hit the poor the hardest. Direct taxes are an equitable way to fill the State's coffers. GST can only exist on luxury goods. But essential items from food to medicine should have zero tax.

Economists have prescribed restructuring the tax policies for both income and wealth as well as a broad-based public investment in health, education and nutrition. They said that a "super-tax" of 2 per cent on the net wealth of the 167 wealthiest families in 2022-23 would yield 0.5 per cent of the national income in revenues and create valuable fiscal space to facilitate such investments.

Contrary to the prescription to levy more tax on the super-rich, write-off of huge amounts of bank loans has been done for some rich businessmen. When there is zero inheritance tax in India, the super-rich must at least pay a handsome percentage of income tax like their western counterparts. But the rate of income tax for those who earn in one financial year above 5 crores is reduced from 42.74% to 39% under the new tax regime from 1st April 2023.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

Escalating tension between Bangladesh, Myanmar threatens regional stability

Hostile actions jeopardise maritime activities of local communities

By Tajul Islam

The recent provocations by Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal have significantly escalated tensions between Myanmar and Bangladesh, threatening regional stability and security. Reports indicate that Myanmar has been engaging in aggressive actions against Bangladeshi vessels operating in the Teknaf and St Martin's sea lanes. This article examines the current situation, its historical context, and the broader implications for regional security, while also addressing the critical issue of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

For several days, Myanmar has reportedly been shooting at trawlers and other vessels in the maritime areas of Teknaf and St Martin's Island. These hostile actions, believed to be carried out by Myanmar trawlers and gunboats, have illegally crossed into Bangladeshi waters. This situation has caused significant fear and disruption for the local population and vessel operators.

The aggressive actions have had a profound impact on the local communities, particularly those dependent on maritime activities. Speedboat owner Syed Alam described a harrowing incident where his vessel, carrying a sick patient, was fired upon near the Myanmar border. Despite the attack, the speedboat managed to reach Saint Martin's safely. Alam noted the presence of Myanmar army ships nearby, suggesting that junta soldiers might be behind the attacks.

Residents of Saint Martin's Island, like Alam, are living in extreme fear. The lack of patrolling by the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) or Coast Guard in the area exacerbates their insecurity. The potential for a sudden invasion by junta soldiers looms large, further destabilizing the region.

Compounding the crisis is the issue of the Rohingya refugees. Since August 2017, over 1.20 million mostly Muslim Rohingyas have taken refuge in Bangladesh, fleeing the violence between Myanmar forces and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). The ARSA, a militant group involved in transnational drugs, weapons, and human trafficking, poses a significant security threat.

Myanmar's secret services have reportedly been recruiting and training a section of the Rohingyas, providing them with military training, including commando and suicide attack training. The objective appears to be to leverage these trained individuals in any potential conflict with Bangladesh. This tactic adds a dangerous new dimension to the already complex and volatile situation.

The presence of Rohingyas in Bangladesh has also raised alarms over international terrorism. Numerous sources indicate that terrorist outfits such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hezbollah, Hamas, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and others are infiltrating the Rohingya camps. These groups are recruiting individuals for terrorist and jihadist activities, posing a serious threat to regional and global security.

The Rohingya camps have become hotspots for drug peddling, arms trafficking, and human trafficking. The infiltration of international terrorist organizations into these camps has exacerbated the security situation, making it more challenging for Bangladesh to maintain stability and safety.

According to recent reports, around 45,000 Rohingyas are currently waiting on the Naf River, hoping to infiltrate Bangladesh. Additionally, many are attempting to enter India through sea

routes and human trafficking networks. This movement is not just a humanitarian issue but also a significant security concern.

Indian intelligence agencies have warned of Pakistani spy agency ISI's involvement in training Rohingyas, using groups like Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) to facilitate this training. The fear is that these trained militants will be used to create instability in India, adding another layer of complexity to the regional security dynamics.

The tensions between Myanmar and Bangladesh over maritime boundaries are not new. The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) delivered a judgment in March 2012, confirming that Saint Martin's Island is entitled to a territorial sea, continental shelf, and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as part of Bangladesh. Despite this clear legal status, Myanmar's recent actions suggest a disregard for international law and norms.

Domestically, political factions in Bangladesh are also leveraging the situation. Members of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami are propagating narratives that question the government's handling of the maritime boundary issues. They argue that the current government's focus on maritime claims has left Saint Martin's Island vulnerable to Myanmar's advances.

These political narratives, combined with the active involvement of pro-Caliphate and anti-democracy groups like Hefazat-e-Islam, further complicate the internal security situation. These groups are reportedly funding and supporting Rohingya militants to create instability in Bangladesh and India.

On the security front, increasing patrols by the BGB and Coast Guard in vulnerable areas like Saint Martin's Island is crucial. Enhanced surveillance and intelligence-sharing with neighbouring countries, especially India, can help in tracking and countering the movement of militants and traffickers.

While addressing the immediate security threats posed by Myanmar's aggression, Bangladesh must also tackle the long-term issue of the Rohingya refugees. The presence of over 1.20 million Rohingyas in Bangladesh has created significant economic, social, and security challenges. The international community has largely failed to provide a sustainable solution to this crisis, leaving Bangladesh to bear the burden.

The initial decision to shelter the Rohingyas was driven by humanitarian considerations. However, the situation has evolved, and the prolonged presence of the Rohingyas is now a significant burden. The humanitarian approach, while noble, must be balanced with pragmatic national interests. Bangladesh cannot afford to let the Rohingya issue undermine its security and development.

The current situation in the Bay of Bengal, marked by Myanmar's aggression and the complex security challenges posed by the Rohingya crisis, requires a multi-faceted response. Bangladesh must navigate these challenges with a combination of diplomatic finesse and robust security measures. The international community also has a role to play in supporting Bangladesh's efforts to maintain regional stability and security. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Why is Lokayukta unable to conduct a proper exam?

Editor,

I am writing to express my deep disappointment and outrage over the recent examination conducted by the Meghalaya Lokayukta for the post of peon, which took place on June 15, 2024. The level of incompetence displayed in this process is staggering and raises serious concerns about the integrity of the Lokayukta - an institution entrusted with the critical task of eradicating corruption in state government organizations.

The admit cards issued for this examination clearly stated that the test would be an aptitude test. However, the candidates were blindsided when the actual examination consisted solely of general knowledge and current affairs questions. This blatant discrepancy not only confuses the candidates but also undermines the credibility of the entire recruitment process. Furthermore, the decision to collect the question papers after the examination is highly suspicious and adds to the growing concerns about the transparency of the process.

The substandard quality of the questions posed in the exam is yet another testament to the gross negligence on the part of the Lokayukta officials. One would expect an institution of such prestige to conduct a fair and rigorous

examination. Instead, what we witnessed was a poorly managed process that reflects a lack of seriousness and accountability.

Adding insult to injury, a notification was published in The Shillong Times on June 21, 2024, announcing the cancellation of the exam. This abrupt decision is the final nail in the coffin of an already disastrous process. It is reminiscent of the ongoing fiasco with the NEET and NET exams, causing further disillusionment among the candidates.

It is high time the officials responsible for this debacle come out of their shells and provide a clear and honest explanation for their careless actions. The citizens of Meghalaya deserve better from the Lokayukta. The trust placed in this institution is paramount, and such blatant mismanagement severely undermines it.

I urge the concerned authorities to take immediate corrective measures and ensure that such incidents do not recur. Transparency, accountability, and adherence to proper procedures are the need of the hour. The Lokayukta must restore its credibility and fulfil its duty to the people of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
R Sarki
Shillong

Irresponsible driving

Editor,
I wish to bring to the

notice of the public and the authorities about the rash driving of some two-wheeler drivers. On June 20, afternoon, an elderly gentleman, while crossing the road just near the St. Edmund's small gate, was hit by a speeding scooter bearing the driver and a small child who had clearly been picked up from his school. If the scooter had been moving at a safe speed, it could have easily braked or swerved to avoid hitting the person but coming at such a high speed it was impossible to do so and the gentleman was hit head on. The scooter skidded on the road for quite a distance and it was a miracle that the child on the scooter, though he fell, did not suffer any injuries at all and the helmet he had on must have protected him.

Thankfully the elderly gentlemen, though badly battered, did not suffer major injuries. This is a request to all those parents whose children are picked up by two wheelers from schools to strongly drill into the heads of their two wheeler drivers that they are not on a racing track and their prime duty is to see that the child gets back home safe and sound. Moving at a safe speed will guarantee that safety manoeuvres can be taken if an emergency should arise otherwise children's lives are put on the line if a speed lunatic is at the steering. Concerned parents please take heed.

Asking the authorities to do something about these speedsters seems pointless as they seem totally helpless at controlling these maniacs.

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

Rising inequality a critical factor

Editor,

Rising inequality is the most pressing problem India is facing now. The French economist, Thomas Piketty and others observed, "The Billionaire Raj headed by India's modern bourgeoisie is now more unequal than the British Raj headed by the colonialist forces." Remedial measures need to be taken without delay. But what is striking is that even a discussion for wealth distribution to cure inequality has become a dreaded topic.

When Sam Pitroda suggested inheritance tax, prevailing in welfare countries like the United States, as one of the ways to achieve the much needed wealth redistribution, the Prime Minister attacked it saying that the mangalsutras of women and the home of common people would be robbed. Interestingly, no political party supported Sam Pitroda's views.

Inequality not only damages the concept of 'government for the people' but also hampers the development of human resources and the growth of the market as well. We know that modern welfare states rely more on direct taxes like income tax, property tax, inheritance tax etc.

"It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong."

— Voltaire

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Cleanliness the core of tourism

TOURISM is becoming Meghalaya's prime livelihood generator. The burgeoning number of homestays and guest houses and the sold-out hotel rooms particularly in Sohra are testimony to this tourism boom but what of the cleanliness quotient? Beyond Shillong there is no waste management system hence all the homestays are burning the garbage which creates environmental pollution and is bad for the residents in the surrounding areas. The State Tourism Department needs to give serious thought to this grave issue which threatens to overwhelm the state and turn every corner into a garbage dump. The whole length of road on both sides of the Umiam Bridge currently undergoing a makeover has turned into a junkyard. Is it not time for the Tourism Department to also have a policing system for polluters?

Recently the Tourism Department unveiled some major tourism plans around the Umiam Lake. That's a brilliant initiative as it will create a bagful of livelihood opportunities but before that there has to be a robust stakeholders' meet so that the local leaders are involved in ensuring that another tourism destination does not become a dumping yard for more garbage. The people of villages around the Umiam are already waging a losing battle with garbage coming from the rivers of Shillong.

The unfortunate part about governance is that those heading the Departments move around in stultified atmospheres and don't travel as ordinary citizens minus the VIP status to witness the ground situation and unlearn what they have been doing as a matter of routine in their offices and making policies without first testing their ideas on the ground. The selling point for Meghalaya are its natural landscapes but if each tourist spot is littered with plastics and broken beer bottles among other forms of discards then it becomes an eyesore for responsible travellers. In fact, the Tourism Department should tie up with public institutions like the Dorbar Shnong or the youth and women's groups in the respective villages to ensure that supervision and implementation of do's and don'ts around tourist spots are meticulously enforced.

In the Riwar areas such as Nohwet, there are NGOs and individuals that conduct regular cleaning drives around their tourist spots. They involve children in these weekly cleaning drives. Such NGOs and individuals should be recognised and their work modelled as part of making tourism a sustainable venture. Without these environmental warriors the tourist sites would have been in a complete mess. Among hoteliers only the Jiva Hospitality Group has demonstrated its commitment to uphold the values of environmental care by regularly cleaning the areas around downtown Shillong apart from maintaining the trees and flowers in the roundabout. If every hotelier were to take responsibility for one area of the city so much could have been achieved in terms of keeping the city of Shillong clean.

Government is not the repository of all wisdom. Consultation with the local populace pays more dividends than employing consultants. Also, its time to create posts of tourist inspectors. Inspection, supervision and penalties are needed to ensure tourism does not boomerang.

Reservation policy in Meghalaya: A perspective on equality of opportunity

By James Dkhar

Reservation is a constitutional mandate aimed at ensuring representation for historically marginalized groups in various domains such as education, employment, government initiatives, scholarships, and politics. The provision stipulates that the extent of reservation must be commensurate with the population and representation of these groups, adhering to the constitutional maximum of 50 percent. Additionally, it mandates that reservations are contingent upon the presence of qualified and eligible candidates from these groups, thereby maintaining performance standards and quality.

Since achieving statehood, Meghalaya has adopted a reservation policy based on a 40:40:5:15 formula. This allocates 40% of state service vacancies to the Khasi-Jaintia tribe, another 40% to the Garo tribe, and the remaining 20% to other groups. Nonetheless, this policy faces several challenges and limitations that compromise its effectiveness and fairness. A notable concern with the policy is that it does not fully align with the state's demographic distribution; the 2011 census indicates that Khasi-Jaintia tribes constitute 46% of the population, while Garo tribes represent about 31%. Hence, Khasi-Jaintia tribes appear somewhat under-represented and Garo tribes somewhat over-represented when compared to their respective population sizes.

This imbalance has led to feelings among some that there is lack of equitable recognition and allocation within the state. Another problem is that there are serious allegations that the policy has been violated and manipulated by some officials and politicians who favour certain communities or individuals over others. There have been cases of corruption, nepotism, political interference, and violation of rules and norms in the implementation of the Reservation Policy. Some groups feel they are denied a fair chance or merit-based selection in the recruitment or admission process. They also feel that the Policy is being misused and abused by some groups that benefit from it at their expense.

A less discussed but significant drawback of the policy is that it ignores the disparities and underdevelopment among various regions of the state. In other words, the reservation policy is based largely on caste/tribe identities with little consideration for the social and economic factors. There are variations in the level of backwardness and development among different regions and sections within the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo tribes.

For instance, some areas have higher poverty, illiteracy and unemployment rates than others. Some sections have lower social and economic status than others. Some regions have less access to basic amenities and infrastructure than others. The policy does not take into account these differences and treats all members of a tribe as a homogeneous group. Such members of the community despite being more disadvantaged or marginalized than others don't get a

fair treatment. There is deprivation and discrimination, as they are not getting adequate opportunities or benefits from the policy.

As a consequence of these problems, the Reservation Policy has been opposed and challenged by some groups who demand a review or change in the Policy. They argue that the Policy is outdated, unjust, and divisive. They perceive the Policy as unfair and biased, leading to feelings of imbalance, injustice, corruption, nepotism, deprivation and discrimination. These feelings are especially strong among those who believe that they are more deserving or disadvantaged than others, but are denied their due share, recognition, chance, merit, opportunity or benefit by the policy.

According to the Constitution, reservation should be seen as a temporary and transitional measure that aims at achieving equality of opportunity for all, and not as a permanent or rigid policy that creates entitlements or privileges for some. Reservation should also be subject to periodic evaluation and review to assess its effectiveness and relevance in achieving its goals, and to make necessary modifications or adjustments as required. The recent introduction of Economically Weaker Section (EWS) reservation in the country serves as evidence that the reservation system is a flexible and dynamic policy that responds to the changing needs and aspirations of different groups in different contexts. Thus, a Reservation Policy can be updated according to the needs and changing times.

Therefore, it is reasonable to review or change the Reservation Policy, as there is still scope for improvement and reform in the reservation system to make it more fair and equitable for all. Individuals should be able to compete on equal terms for advantaged positions in society. To compete on equal terms means that people have the same chances of success regardless of their social circumstances, such as their economic class, or race. This political ideal emphasizes the personal ambition, talent and abilities of the individual, rather than based on membership in a group.

However, there are different ways of understanding how to achieve equality of opportunity in practice. One way is to adopt a formal concept of equality of opportunity, which means that positions and posts that confer advantages should be open to all applicants and that applications are assessed on their merits (unreserved category). Another way is to ensure that substantive equality of opportunity (reserved category) prevails, which means that people have not only formal access to opportunity but also fair access to education, training and resources that are necessary to compete for advantaged positions.

Substantive equality of opportunity is a broader and more expansive concept than formal equality of opportunity. It is preferable to formal equality of opportunity as it

takes into account the broader social situation and it aims to address not only the direct discrimination that some groups may face due to their status or identity, but also the indirect discrimination that results from the cumulative effects of social and economic inequalities. Substantive equality of opportunity requires that all individuals have the same opportunities to become qualified to occupy advantaged positions through competition, and that society should take appropriate measures to ensure those equal opportunities, such as the equalization of starting conditions. It recognizes that formal access to positions and posts is not enough to ensure equal chances of success for everyone, because some hinder their ability to acquire the qualifications and resources that are necessary for competing for advantaged positions.

For example, a person born into a poor family may have less access to quality education, health care, nutrition, social networks etc. than a person who is born into a privileged family. These factors may affect their cognitive development, physical well-being, motivation, and confidence, which in turn may affect their performance in tests, interviews, and other selection procedures. Hence, substantive equality of opportunity (reserved category) promotes not only fairness but also dignity for everyone.

Therefore, to improve the reservation system in Meghalaya and update the existing policy, some possible steps are: Reviewing and revising the reservation quota for different categories based on their proportion in population, representation, degree of backwardness and development necessary to make the reservation policy more equitable and proportional. This would help in addressing the concerns and grievances of various groups who feel that they are under-represented or over-represented in the services under the state. It would also help in creating a balance between the interests of different groups and fostering a sense of belonging and unity among them.

A comprehensive survey or census is important to collect accurate and updated data on the social and economic status of different regions and communities in Meghalaya. This would help in assessing the ground reality and identifying the gaps and challenges faced by various groups. It would help design and implement a reservation policy that meets the needs and aspirations of all the people. It may be better to provide special reservation to those backward and underprivileged members based on their social and economic status, and let them compete among themselves instead of with their more privileged members. This would ensure that the reservation policy is more targeted and effective in addressing the specific needs and challenges of different groups. That the most deserving and needy groups are provided with adequate opportunities and benefits to

overcome their backwardness and achieve their potential. This embodies the core constitutional ethos that guides the reservation policy.

Clear and objective criteria and thresholds are essential to identify who is backward and who is not based on various indicators such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, health, infrastructure, employment status of their parents in state services etc. This would help in avoiding any ambiguity or arbitrariness in the classification and categorization of different groups.

Ensuring transparency and accountability in the implementation and monitoring of the reservation policy and preventing any violation or manipulation by any authority or individual is crucial to make the reservation policy effective and credible. This would ensure that the reservation policy is followed in letter and spirit. It would also help in detecting and correcting any anomalies or irregularities that may occur in the process of recruitment or admission.

While there are opinions suggesting that the VPP has taken a significant risk with this reservation issue, I believe that their move is not merely a gamble but a well-calculated strategy. The Reservation Policy in Meghalaya, as initially mentioned, is bound by the Constitutional cap of 50 percent. This limitation has sparked debate over the policy's constitutional validity, given that the combined reservation for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category—encompassing both Khasi-Jaintia and Garo communities—surpasses this threshold. While some contend that Meghalaya's unique circumstances exempt it from this rule, this claim remains untested in court, with a similar case ongoing in Punjab. Should the court uphold the 'exceptional situation' exemption, the policy will stand as is. Conversely, a ruling against it could profoundly affect Meghalaya, particularly the Garo community, who might then have to vie for ST category positions alongside Khasi-Jaintia individuals. Despite this concern, I am optimistic that such an outcome will be circumvented to ensure fairness for the Garo community.

To conclude, inequality is a widespread and complex issue in our world today. It affects various aspects of our lives, such as education, health, income, and justice. However, not all inequalities are the same. Some inequalities are unjust, meaning they are caused by discrimination, oppression, or exploitation. These inequalities violate human rights and dignity and need to be challenged and eliminated. Other inequalities are natural or inevitable, meaning they are based on individual differences, preferences, or abilities. These inequalities are a way of life and acceptable as long as they do not harm anyone or create unfair advantages.

Therefore, it is important to recognize the difference between unjust and natural inequalities and respond to them appropriately. Lastly, discrimination, marginalisation, nepotism, corruption are evils to be avoided, not policies to be enforced.

Paper Leak: High Time for 'Pariksha Pe Charcha'

By Dr. Brajesh Kumar Tiwari

The Ministry of Education has abruptly canceled the UGC-NET June 2024 examination, a mere day after it was administered. The CBI has taken on responsibility for the case and will now look into it more. Concurrent with the debate over the NEET-UG and UGC-NET tests, Subodh Kumar Singh has been removed from the post of Director General of the National Testing Agency (NTA). The UGC NET exam is administered to facilitate admission into PhD programs, as well as to determine eligibility for the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and the position of Assistant Professor in universities throughout the nation.

The Supreme Court has recently issued a notice to the Center and the National Testing Agency (NTA) in response to a petition requesting the cancellation of the NEET-UG 2024 exam due to an alleged paper leak. The upcoming court session for this case is scheduled for July 8. The NEET-UG medical entrance exam was administered by the National Testing Agency on May 5. Patna Police has asserted in court that the question paper for NEET-UG has been compromised. A staggering number of 2.3 million candidates have registered for NEET-UG this year, setting a new record. The issue of paper leakage is not novel; even esteemed examinations such as IIT JEE in 1997 and All India Pre-Medical Test in 2011 have experienced instances of leaked papers. The issue of paper leak has exacerbated over time. Media reports indicate that over the past 7 years, more than 70 examinations in various states of the country have experienced paper leaks, resulting in adverse consequences for approximately 20 million young individuals.

Laws to stop leaks of papers and its loopholes: The Public Examination (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, also known as the anti-paper leak law, has been implemented in the country. The notification from the central government was issued precisely at midnight on Friday, June 21. The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act was enacted by the Lok Sabha on February 6 and subsequently approved by the Rajya Sabha on 9 February of the current year. The bill was approved by President Draupadi Murmu on February 12 and subsequently enacted into a law. Even before the Central Government makes laws, many states have made strict laws at their own level. The question is also that even after the accused are caught, how do they get away easily when there are strict provisions for punishment under the law.

The Act has certain loopholes which need immediate resolution. The offence of paper leak of public examination affects the public at large as well as it creates a huge financial burden on the State Exchequer. The recently passed Act prescribes a minimum term of imprisonment (minimum as prescribed is three years but should be at least ten years) however the amount of punishment prescribed under the Act does not match with the gravity of offence. There is no provision of time bound investigation. The Act does not provide any fixed time period within which the re-examination must be conducted again.

Along with additional terms of imprisonment in case of default of payment of fine for an offence under the Act the provision of forfeiture of property of the offender should also be included. The candidate involved in taking advantage of unfair means should be disqualified for any future examination.

In accordance with this Act, only officers of the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) or Assistant Commissioner of Police are

authorized to investigate instances of unfair means in public examinations. Given that the offenses addressed by the Act are not ordinary or common offenses but rather impact a whole group of candidates, it may be necessary to establish a Special Investigation and Regulation Authority to conduct thorough investigations into cases involving the offenses specified in the Act. Investigators and administrative officers lack knowledge of the appropriate procedures and protocols for conducting the examination. Under such circumstances, these organizations require specialized training to ensure that individuals who are conducting their work with integrity do not become ensnared.

Actions Needed: However, mere provision of strict punishment will not provide any effective solution to this problem. The morale of the students who were honestly preparing for competitive exams is now at its lowest ebb. Today there is despair within them and this despair is also breaking the morale of their families. If any examination is to be held, preparations for leaking the paper start months before it. Can't such an institution be formed which conducts pure examinations at a fixed time like the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). Institutions like UPSC should become role models. Moreover, appointments of people with political connections in the recruitment commissions should be completely stopped and the examination commission should have its own printing press or the soft copy should be sent directly through code lock one hour in advance, and should be sent to the examination center. It should be printed and distributed to the candidates present there. With this method, question papers will certainly be a little more expensive than press printing, but will be safe and leak-proof. There is a need to identify and expose dubious middlemen enjoying political patronage. Also, within a month of the arrest of the paper mafia, the punishment should be given within a stipulated time in the fast-track court. If any coaching institute is found involved, action should not be taken only against the concerned accused, the coaching institute should also be closed.

Engaging external agencies promotes the occurrence of unethical practices. From the initial preparation of paper sets to their distribution to the examination center, a large number of individuals are involved. Each person has a clearly defined responsibility, creating a hierarchical structure. Question papers undergo multiple stages of handling during the process of drafting, printing, and transportation to the examination centers. In such a scenario, it is imperative to prohibit the use of mobile phones by all individuals involved, and to enforce a strict limit on the number of devices allowed, to the greatest extent feasible. In order to closely monitor the entire process, it is advisable to install closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras at the examination centers starting from the paper setting stage.

The problem of paper leak should not be viewed through the lens of politics. The escalating instances of paper leaks have cast a shadow of uncertainty over the prospects of students throughout our nation, spanning from the northern to the southern regions. This issue is not specific to any particular state or political party; rather, it pertains to the future of India's young population, making it a crucial topic.

(The writer is Associate Professor, Atal School of Management (ABVSME), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi @ bkt_brajesh. Views expressed are personal)

Letters to the Editor

Road repairing at MES-Rynjah

Editor,
The road repairing work between the MES to Rynjah road started on May 1, 2024 and the time for completion was by the end of May 2024. However, till date there is no sign of completion of the road repairing work and the pace of the work seems like it will take a year. Commuters are facing a lot of trouble going to NEIGRIHMS and other destinations via this MES route. The alternate route through Laitumkrah point is heavy with traffic and causes unnecessary vehicle congestion and delay in movement. We request for expeditious completion of this strategic road.

Yours etc.,
Prof. S P Dash,
Shillong

Wanted a cleaner Shillong

Editor,
Shillong is a beautiful landscape but dirty and unkempt. I vividly remember that two to three days before the G20 Meeting in Shillong, there was a 24/7 cleaning drive by the Government machinery. There was white-washing, painting, road signage, weeding, road repairs, plastics collection etc. Shillong really looked beautiful and clean wherever the dignitaries had meetings or visited Shillong. That's

fine and we are proud of such gestures. But look where we are now? I live in Umshing and I can see that both sides of the road beginning at the Golfink stretch from Polo to Mawroh junction is strewn with all kinds of plastic waste, paper wrappers especially from Lad Shyap to Golf club, thanks to the fast-food mobile vendors and other sellers. Riblong point to 3rd mile Upper Shillong is again very dirty; the stretch from Nehru Park (McEcl) to Umiam Dam View Point is an eyesore especially near the Umiam Bridge. It has become a free for all garbage dumping place thanks to the passengers who cannot wait 15 minutes without eating. After that they just discard everything by the roadside. There are no restrictions;

no warning signs for locals and tourists. Anyone can do whatever they like and throw anything wherever they want. Meghalaya is a free for all State. I wonder how our senior officers and Ministers travelling on these roads do not see the ugliness or are they blind to such littering and mess?

Over and above everything else, the Forest Department has felled down the trees in these stretches last month but added more trouble as these trees are left stranded on the road side from Golf club to Lad Shyap and around. I wonder why the Forest Department left these trees here. Why can't these be cleared and lifted to some other place. This makes the place unkempt but no one is bothered.

Now my question is: Who is responsible for cleaning, weeding and clearing these? Team Jiva, the public or the Government machinery. The SMB is doing its work but that is clearly not sufficient. Where are the muster rolls of PWD, PHE? We don't see them except when activated. In Guwahati City, I could observe that the Municipal staff are working round the clock and in spite of the busy roads, the city looks far cleaner than our city.

Khyndailad and Motphran area are the busiest as well as the dirtiest. If the Government officials from the SMB dare to visit the place in the early hours (6-9 am) and late at night, the sight is horrendous. The question then is, "How SMART is Shillong considering the SMART city project?"

I hope this letter is read and given serious thought by all Shillongites. Let us take care of our own city as we care for our own homes. Let's stop throwing trash from our vehicles and dump garbage on roadsides or drains. A word of deepest appreciation for Team Jiva and others who labour ceaselessly to make our beautiful City ever clean.

Let's make our City clean again!

Yours etc.,
Reward Rymbai,
Via email

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"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

— Jim Elliot

The Shillong Times

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Budget and more

WITH the 18th Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, having started its first session, the election of the Speaker is slated for Wednesday and the real action would start thereafter. A complete budget, replacing the interim budget passed by parliament earlier this year, would be a major highlight of the first session. With old faces returning to head various key ministries, very little surprises need be expected in the course of this session or in the third term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Even the Speaker would not change as the NDA aims to reinstall Om Birla for another term. The counter by senior-most opposition parliamentarian, Kodikkunnil Suresh of the Congress, is no more than a formality as the numbers overwhelmingly favour the BJP-led ruling alliance.

Hints are that the Union Budget would give concessions to the taxpayers in terms of income tax reliefs. The prime minister had stated after his nomination as PM for a third term that the new government would extend more support to the middle-class. With the national economy in a sustainable mode and the GST revenues having majorly increased, the government can afford to be liberal. The Modi terms managed the finances in a scrupulous manner and avoided playing to the gallery. With salaries in various sectors remaining more or less stagnant and the cost of living on the rise, the salary-fixed class is faced with serious financial difficulties. Nirmala Sitharaman's continuation as finance minister is reassurance that there could be positive outcomes.

In fact, several of the senior ministers in the Modi government have not been changed, though portfolios were reshuffled as in the case of Rajnath Singh moving from home to defence the last term. This general continuity is both a strength and a disadvantage to the nation. The Modi team continuing its governance for a straight three terms, or 15 years, ensured stability. But, this has also discouraged change in terms of new ideas, new approaches to governance. The continuation of the same faces and the same policies for so many years is a luxury in any democracy. The results, however, from this stability are not very appreciable. India as a whole has not changed under Modi even as there have been major strides in the infrastructure sector. A key sector like the Railways failed to grow in any spectacular manner. The Vande Bharat trains are, at best, a minor improvement. Nothing earth-shaking has happened in the past 10 years. There were hardly any bold decisions or path-breaking steps. The net result was a steep fall in the esteem and number of the BJP members in Parliament – 240 in Lok Sabha against 303 the last time. It's time for Modi-3 to perform better and show results.

It's a time of wait and watch for the nation.

Letters to the Editor

MBOSE should be vigilant against pirated books

Editor,

Over a month ago, a major crackdown in Guwahati uncovered the alarming presence of pirated NCERT books in Assam. The joint operation by the police and NCERT targeted devious dealers in Pan Bazar, Guwahati, unmasking a racket that had been flooding the market with counterfeit books. These fake publications, lacking hallmarks and watermarks, are typically poor in quality. A host of unscrupulous publishers from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh are behind this influx of duplicate books in the Northeast, luring book dealers with higher trade discounts.

Considering this situation, the Government of Meghalaya must not sit idle but remain vigilant. There is every likelihood that book dealers in the state may also fall prey to such fraudulent publishers. Proactive measures are essential to prevent a similar issue from cropping up within the state. Usually, such illicit deals come off in secrecy and gradually become widespread. It is imperative that the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) promptly issue strict guidelines and seek the full support of all book traders in Shillong, Tura, and other remote areas to send these unscrupulous publishers packing.

Pirated books not only undermine the integrity of education but also result in

significant revenue losses for our esteemed MBOSE. It's not just NCERT and CBSE books that are affected; pirated textbooks from renowned publishers like Oxford, Orient Longman, McMillan, Pitambar, and Allied Publications were also found circulating freely in certain areas of Garo Hills some years ago. Fortunately, a tip-off from a vigilant publisher in Shillong led to the arrest of the gangs involved in these illicit activities. During the last book fair in Shillong, several stalls were found openly selling best-seller titles for Rs 100 all pirated. Isn't this a kick in the stomach for the creative writers who rely on royalties from publishers for subsistence?

The Government must adopt all measures necessary to uphold academic integrity. Let's not allow rapacious counterfeiters to pull the wool over our eyes any longer.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal
Shillong

Politics is dynamic; politicians should adapt

Editor,

The front page news "Kharlukhi attributes NPP's loss to quota policy issue" (ST June 21, 2024) made interesting reading. The assessment of WR Kharlukhi, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha on the recent Lok Sabha election in Meghalaya is rational and objective. I do not disagree with him that "politics keeps on changing." Politics

How would Swami Vivekananda view Hindutva, Modi, and Modi's India?

By Deepa Majumdar

This article is dedicated with gratitude to Swami Vivekananda

It has been over a hundred and fifty years since the advent of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902 CE). To understand his significance for modernity and India, one must first understand the Indian civilization and its guiding principles. Given its unbroken lineage of the highest mysticism, this civilization responds to the needs of each age through the advent of saints and divine Incarnations – not politics. Before its reincarnation as modern India, British India responded to the challenges of modernity with the advent of the Holy Trio – Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda – who came to teach the world the virtues necessary to conquer lust and greed, the ultimate causes of patriarchy and capitalism. To call them Hindu is to limit their glory. Even if born within specific religions, divine Incarnations, and self-realized saints (like Ramana Maharshi) belong to the whole universe. India has given rise to numberless saints and sages from different religions – not just Hinduism. The birth of Incarnations (like Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother) signifies the severity of the crisis of an age. For the greater the crisis, the more powerful the medicine has to be – divine Incarnations being the most powerful panacea ever.

Incarnations and saints each come with specific purposes and vocations. The Holy Trio came to regenerate India – not just by removing British colonialism – but by cleansing India of the yoke of her original sins (casteism, patriarchy, etc.) and more recent toxins. Swamiiji loved India – but not blindly. A clear-eyed prophet, he recognized her internal crises. In one place he refers to India as a "corpse" – both inside and outside. Instead of relying on the statistical gaze, Swamiiji wandered the length and breadth of India to discover directly the miseries of the downtrodden – injustices he inveighed against in the strongest possible language. In short, Swamiiji, a prince among yogis, who represented the highest Vedantic Hinduism, inveighed against the terrible inequities of lower Hinduism, especially the caste system, which he called "don't touchism." True to the ideals of higher Hinduism, he embraced all viable religions as equally true – thus echoing Sri Ramakrishna's inimitable patois about the highest mystical state – "all jacksals howl the same way" – meaning at the summit, mystics of all true religions experience the same God. The poor, the so-called pariah, the oppressed, and women were the special

focus of Swamiiji's love. Not only a patriot and prophet of modernity, Swamiiji, was the divine architect who unleashed the unique destiny of modern India. As guardian, I am sure he is present in every Indian home where a child is abused.

In the light of this brief background, how would Swamiiji view Hindutva, PM Modi, the direction of Modi's India, and the untold miseries of "ordinary" Indians? Inasmuch as Modi has returned to a third term in power, this vexing question must be answered by thoughtful Hindus, especially votaries of Swamiiji. Given Modi's self-anointed, near-messianic stature, especially his self-canonizing hint at immaculate conception – answering this question becomes all the more imperative. I believe in immaculate conception. But this miraculous birth, which defies the laws of nature, belongs exclusively to divine Incarnations, like Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Christ. Not even saints are born of immaculate conception. At best they are born of lust-free unions. So how can a politician, who is not even a monk, be born of immaculate conception? Unlike politicians, who are addicted to power, a monk or nun is supposed to renounce all worldly temptations – especially power. For, the opposite of God is not evil or nothingness – but power.

To understand how Swamiiji would respond to the direction of Modi's India – we must first understand his vision of India. What Swamiiji loved was not a geographical entity, but a set of semi-divine principles guiding the destiny of this unique civilization. Offering his fealty and adoration to these principles, Swamiiji saw this highest India (not Indians) as a beacon of the world – indeed a Vishwaguru (world teacher). He therefore warned against India succumbing to the temptations of power; thus betraying the historical principles that govern her destiny. Seeing society through Vedantic lenses, Swamiiji wanted us to reach beyond mere equality (the bedrock of democracy) to same-sightedness – by seeing the same divinity in all beings. For him, therefore, the caste system was not merely unjust, but a direct violation of Vedantic principles. Given this brief portrait, chances are, Swamiiji would respond as follows to Mr Modi, Hindutva ideologues (like Bajrang Dal), Hindu fascism, and Modi's India:

First, Swamiiji would warn Hindutva ideologues – especially Modi and politician monks like Yogi Adityanath

– that mixing religion with politics is playing with fire. Theocracies do not work, unless led by enlightened leaders, like the Dalai Lama. Demanding total separation of temple and state, Swamiiji would rebuke those who politicize God, India's noble governing principles, and her unique mystical leadership, as a most wily and cynical ploy, all for the sake of personal political gains. To separate the wheat from chaff, he would perhaps recommend a regulatory body (like the Catholic church) for Hinduism.

Second, Swamiiji would reject Modi's materialistic vision of India – from bullet trains and space programs to billionaire buddies. Without being a Luddite, he would inveigh against the terrible gap between rich and poor endemic to India's gung-ho culture-capitalism.

Third, Swamiiji, who bemoaned the lack of brotherhood in India, would object in the strongest possible language to the resurgence of India's original sins and more recent toxins (like Islamophobia) under Modi's watch – from terrible violence against women and religious minorities – to caste violence, alleged extra-judicial killings outside India, extra-judicial bulldozing of homes of accused criminals within India, creeping authoritarianism, betrayals of the Constitution, and overall Hindu fascism and imperialism. He would reject growing class inequalities, alongside growing avarice, runaway materialism, and conspicuous consumption. He would be horrified at the anti-colonial hatred now raging among Indians emboldened by Modi's own anti-colonial bitterness. Even in the heyday of colonialism, Swamiiji saw wonderful virtues in westerners – especially the British. Moreover, he would thank those westerners who gave up their lives for India. The "slave mentality," Modi often warns against, Swamiiji would say, lies not in being the underdog, but in what Nietzsche called the resentment of the underdog.

Swamiiji, who mixed freely with people from the lowest castes and Muslims, perhaps seeing the Divine in them, would be horrified at caste hatred and Islamophobia by a state machinery that has emboldened violence by Hindu ideologues. He would see caste prejudice as the most notorious blasphemy ever against Vedanta's same-sighted vision of man. Above all, Swamiiji who was a chaste feminist, would be horrified by sexual violence against

women (even little girls and babies) in contemporary India. A peerless cosmopolitan and natural democrat, Swamiiji would object to growing tyranny and the open flouting of democratic principles in India – especially by state officials. He would be horrified by the overall lack of ethics in everyday India – especially rampant corruption and bribery.

Fourth, Swamiiji, who wanted a martial spirit – but not militarism – warned that India would perish spiritually if she went after power and militarism. While recognizing the danger of India being landlocked between two nuclear-armed neighbors (China and Pakistan) – Swamiiji would reject Hindutva's naked will-to-power. He would also reject reckless militarism and unprincipled alliances with rogue nations. Worship of power (instead of goodness and moral virtues) is one sign of a civilizational crisis. This will-to-power, which was pronounced even in the India of my youth, is far more pronounced now – its side-effects ranging from sycophancy to a politics of patronage.

Finally, Swamiiji would object vehemently to the ostentatious religiosity demonstrated by Hindutva ideologues. If hypocrisy is mendacity, then religious hypocrisy is mendacity on steroids. He would question Mr Modi's 45-hour long meditation at the Vivekananda Rock Memorial, in Kanyakumari. Because real meditation is almost impossible for lay persons – especially the worldly-minded. What modernity calls "meditation" is usually mere mindfulness. True meditation demands the highest possible chastity most people are incapable of, especially those wedded to political power.

I would venture so far as to say Swamiiji's ideals for India and those of Modi and Hindutva ideologues are polar opposites. Let us therefore remember that he never saw people as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc., but as so many manifestations of God. Let us not forget that he adored Christ, who, in his eyes, was the greatest possible monk. He also greatly admired a noble Muslim pir. Let us not forget that Swamiiji's Guru, Sri Ramakrishna practiced not only the various categories of Hinduism to their mystical summit, but also Islam and Christianity. Swamiiji's overall vision for India and the world, therefore, was the total opposite of what Modi and his followers have enforced. Unlike hate-filled Hindutva ideologues who ache to rule the west and the world, Swamiiji wanted the highest India to lead the world. A leader rules through love – not power!

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Let's Talk Now..!

Many years ago I used to travel by the local train and quite enjoyed the journey. There were wonderful scenes outside, trees and greenery rushing by and giving you a sense of peace and quiet. I decided I'd travel once more, just for old time's sake, and told my driver to wait at the end of the line, at the last station so I could enjoy the train ride and my nostalgia.

As I waited on the platform, I reminisced about the good old days when I did so much dreaming on the rides and was often, yes often lulled to sleep by the systematic talk the wheels had with the rails down below.

The train arrived and I got into it. The noise hit me even above the roar of the train picking up speed. It was as if the whole world was talking, shouting, cursing and yelling at the same time. I wondered whether there was some problem, as often in our country, everybody spoke at once if something bad had happened, each offering a solution and all creating more of a din than the chance of wise words being heard.

"What is it?" I asked the man who was next to me. "Something has hap-

pened?"

"Tomorrow!" said the man looking at me directly while I tried not to stamp on his feet.

"What tomorrow?" I asked. "We are talking about now. Right now!"

"Okay then day after tomorrow!" said the same man and I realised with a bit of embarrassment that he was speaking on his phone.

I ventured into the middle of the compartment and found that not a single person was looking out of the window, speaking with his neighbour or even like before enjoying a game of cards. Every single passenger was on the phone, disinterested with anything else, just smiling, frowning, yelling, whispering at an unknown person on the other end.

It was as if the train was not just filled with passengers but also loaded with all those they were speaking with.

It was quite a weight the rails were carrying!

I got off at the other end and walked to my car, looking forward to the silence inside. My driver was busy on the phone. I got in, waited for him to finish, then watched as he turned to me, "Did you enjoy the ride sir?" he asked.

My silence spoke more than any words could have done. I knew there was no point telling him about his phone which must have kept him company for the last hour or so.

The world has changed and the mobile has now become our companion, friend and constant source of entertainment. Nobody speaks to anybody next to them anymore. You need to get on the phone to speak even to the one who walks with you, or sits with you.

This happened a few days ago while talking to my friend Rufus on my cell and suddenly found him walking next to me; yet we continued conversing to each other through our instruments! Made me think the wily mobile is sure taking over our lives!

Here's another incident, and I'm sure you've been in

the same embarrassing boat as me. This happened when a friend, who said we hadn't met for a long time, called me out for dinner, along with his family. "Hi," I said as I walked into the hotel lobby. "Hello," he said, winking at me, "you got the reservations?"

"What reservations?" I spluttered, "I thought you were taking me out? At least that's what you told me when you called me?"

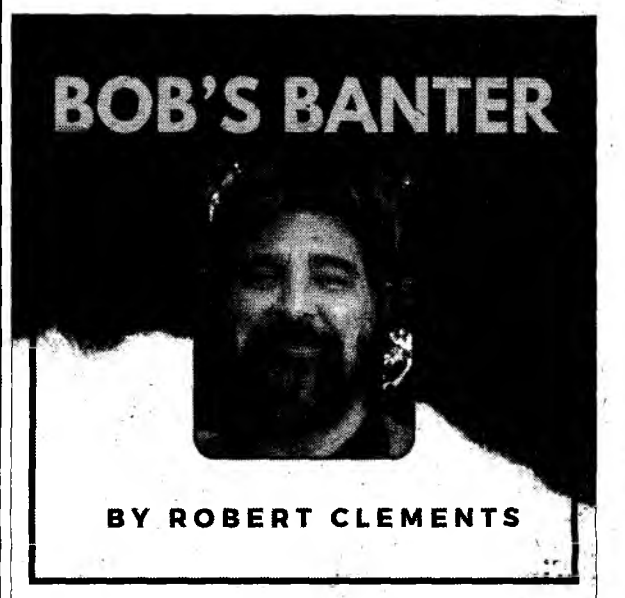
"Without reservations I cannot leave the country damn it!" he shouted, as he smiled at me, waved me in and continued yelling into his rather tiny phone while I looked on sheepishly.

His wife, a pretty woman and a mother of two equally good looking teenagers was already sitting inside the restaurant, along with her children. They looked like one big happy family as they all talked, shouted, laughed and cracked jokes. All this into their own fancy phones!

"You're coming in a little late," said his pretty wife, smiling at me with her eyes.

"No," I said, "I'm right on time."

"But if you come in late you'll miss all our kitty party action!" she cried into her



cutie pink mobile, leaving me mortified at my stupidity.

"Hi uncle!" said his daughter across the table.

"Hi!" I said, "My word you've really grown, stop calling me uncle."

"Uncle," continued the girl talking into her yellow tinted instrument, "you've got to allow Shobha to come with us; we'll see she comes back by eleven. Promise uncle, promise!"

She grinned at me and winked and I sheepishly winked back at her and turned to her younger brother, who seemed lost in thought. "How's school?" I asked.

"Algebra was terrible," said the boy, "but I've taken notes and I'll give them to you."

"I don't need any notes," I smiled, "Luckily I don't have to study Algebra anymore."

"I can give you my geometry notes too if you'll come out with me," said the boy seductively, grinning at me and pressing his heavyweight Chinese phone tightly to his ear with anticipation. I looked away quickly and studiously studied the menu. "You're become very quiet," said my friend, giving me a nudge and sitting next to me.

"I guess you all are very busy" I said, looking at his smart cell lying still on the table. "But you can't remain so quiet," continued my friend shouting into the second phone, I'd forgotten he had.

"We'll organize a lovely kitty party just for you!" said his pretty wife at my side, looking at me coyly.

"No, your dad isn't coming along!" said her daughter, smiling at me.

"We'll study Algebra, geometry and some new topics together," said the son, winking at me.

I fled the restaurant, ran outside and heard my mobile ring. "Hey," said my friend's voice, "we haven't talked for a long time, let's talk now..!"

Read more in the author's motivational book DARE available on Amazon in bobsbanter@gmail.com

Rights Commission has sought a report from the Union labour and employment ministry on allegations against an e-commerce giant in Haryana's Manesar. The allegations include forcing workers not to take even toilet or water breaks until they complete unloading packages from six trucks, each 24 feet long! How long will it take to complete an enquiry and take appropriate action against the Company? Should the customers keep on buying goods from such Company before it comes clean? Recently, in Bengaluru, the same e-commerce giant posted a casual note, "Sorry to know about the inconvenience," after it sent to a couple a highly venomous cobra instead of the item they had ordered. Given the disregard for human rights, this is a natural outcome.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Delayed Grade IV SAD Results & Irregularities in Lokayukta Recruitment

Editor,

I am writing to express my concern regarding two critical issues pertaining to the delayed declaration of results for the Grade IV posts in the Secretariat Administration Department (SAD) conducted by the MPSC and the recent examinations conducted by the Meghalaya Lokayukta. Firstly, there has been an

inexcusable delay in the declaration of results for the Grade IV posts of the Secretariat Administration examinations conducted by the MPSC. This examination was held as early as January, and yet, as we approach June, candidates remain in limbo with no updates on the outcome. Such delays not only cause undue stress and uncertainty among applicants but also raise questions about the efficiency and transparency of the evaluation process.

Secondly, regarding the recent examinations for the LDA and Peon posts under the Meghalaya Lokayukta, there are multiple discrepancies that demand immediate attention. The initial advertisement clearly outlined specific quotas for different tribes – 1 position for Unreserved, and 1 for Khasi/Jaintia for LDA roles, and 1 position each for Unreserved and Garo and 2 positions for Khasi/Jaintia, for Peon posts, and yet during the examination, candidates were not provided with a section to indicate their tribe category. This oversight raises serious concerns about how the authorities intend to accurately determine eligibility and allocate positions according to the advertised quotas leading to potential confusion and unfair selection.

Furthermore, there were inconsistencies between the syllabus mentioned in the admit card and the actual examination paper. For LDA posts, candidates were surprised to encounter a substantial portion of General Knowledge questions, despite the admit card indicating only English, Apti-

tude and Arithmetic (with only seven Arithmetic questions). Similarly, for Peon posts, the exam included General Knowledge questions instead of the expected Aptitude section. Such discrepancies not only disadvantage candidates who prepared based on the provided syllabus but also undermine the fairness of the examination process. It is imperative that recruitment examinations adhere strictly to the advertised criteria to ensure fairness and equal opportunity for all applicants. The failure to collect information on tribe categories during the examination and the deviation from advertised syllabi raises serious doubts about the integrity and transparency of these recruitment processes.

These issues highlight a lack of coordination and transparency in the examination process, which undermines the candidates' efforts and trust in the system. I urge the authorities responsible to take immediate corrective actions, including transparent communication with candidates regarding the evaluation process and ensuring that future examinations adhere strictly to the advertised criteria. This will not only restore confidence in the recruitment process but also uphold the principles of fairness and transparency that are essential for public trust.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

"You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great."

— Zig Ziglar

The Shillong Times

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Non-aligned MP in Parliament

MEGHALAYA sent two MPs, one from the Congress Party and the other from a regional party the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) which is not aligned to any of the two coalition of parties the NDA or the INDIA group. This leaves the VPP free to support any group based on issues. Soon after the poll results on June 4 and the decisive win of the MP Candidate Dr Ricky AJ Syngkon, VPP supremo Ardent Basaiawmoit while speaking to the media had stated that the VPP would fight corruption at the national level and in Meghalaya combat corruption, poverty and partiality. In its election manifesto the VPP had stated it would amend the National Education Policy 2020 and also review the border dispute resolution mechanism between Meghalaya and Assam. The VPP promised to review the job reservation policy and to implement the Inner-Line Permit (ILP) besides opposing the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the Uniform Civil Code. The VPP reiterated its stand of promoting transparency, accountability, and efficiency in governance and upholding the democratic principles enshrined in the Constitution, including the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of all citizens. The Party spoke of upholding principles of secularism in letter and spirit to foster an environment of multiculturalism, peaceful co-existence, and the protection of minorities across the country.

Since the VPP is essentially populated by academicians at the leadership front much has been promised in the education sector. Their manifesto says it will engage with the government to ensure that the central educational institutes cater to the needs of local people in terms of seats for learning, employment, and courses of study and also promote the learning of foreign languages and soft skills by assisting existing institutions. Above all the VPP said it would advocate for bringing Meghalaya under Article 371 to protect the state from the application of central laws affecting the customs and traditions of the people. The VPP further talks about amending the Mines and Mineral Development Regulation Act 1957 to suit local requirements, resist the implementation of the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act, 2023, in Meghalaya, and advocate robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure that large-scale factories operating in the state adhere to national environmental standards while providing economic benefits for the local communities.

The VPP vows to continue the legacy of demanding inclusion of the Khasi language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution but it will also oppose the imposition of Hindi while upholding English as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges and as the official language of the state. This manifesto hit all the right notes and it is no surprise that the VPP won by a huge majority. But pragmatism dictates that implementing the VPP manifesto would require all the negotiating skills of the new MP. Passing the ILP, recognition of Khasi language, invoking Article 371 etc., would require constitutional amendments which also means the support of the ruling party - the NDA. It would necessarily mean constantly lobbying for those demands. How Dr Syngkon manages the balancing act will be keenly watched by political observers across the spectrum.

Solidarity among the Khasi: What explains it?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The often-mentioned 200 odd ethnic communities in the North East can be divided into four groups based on language, viz., Austroasiatic (Khasi); Tibeto-Burman, within which you have Kok-Borok (Garo-Bodo-Tripuri along with Konyak and Singpho), Tani Mishmi (ethnic groups of Arunachal Pradesh except for the Tibetan groups), and Kuki-Chin-Mizo (this includes the Kuki-Zomi, Naga, Meitei, and Karbi); Indo-European (associated with Assamese and Bengali); and Tai-Ahom (groups like Tai Phake, Tai Aiton, etc). This, however, does not mean that the ethnic communities within the same language group have an amicable relationship with each other.

The Kuki-Zomi, Meitei, and Naga shared a common ancestor not very long ago. In fact, Meitei may have emerged from the intermingling of the various groups that had settled in the valley. However, at the moment, the Kuki-Zomi and the Meitei are locked in an existential struggle with each other. The Naga are on the sidelines, but they are fighting for their own separate homeland, removed from both the Kuki-Zomi and the Meitei. But there are complications here as well. Some clans among the Thangkul Naga, the major Naga group behind the NSCN-IM, claim to have a connection with the Meitei royal family. Naga groups like the Anal are more closely related to the Kuki-Zomi and were referred to as Old Kukis in the past. And the Thangkul language is the bridge between the Kuki-Zomi and Naga languages. At the moment, though, the Thangkul led NSCN-IM is reported to be training the Meitei militants who are attacking Kuki civilians, while Kuki militants are hitting NSCN-IM positions in Myanmar with the help of Indian armed forces. In the past, the Naga-Kuki conflict led to the killings and displacement of thousands of people. Within the Kuki-Zomi as well, internecine conflicts were fought in the past, e.g., the Kuki-Paite conflict. Thus, one can see how groups that in the past were derived from the same stock can become deadly enemies of each other, with the animosity spilling over into the present. In this context, Fabian Lyngdoh's article 'Solving Tribal Boundary Issues: The Ancestors' Way' becomes very pertinent.

In his article, Fabian Lyngdoh discusses how the Khasi, who were the first to enter the subcontinent from the east, were able to maintain their identity while being encircled by groups that came later. Despite not having formal political boundaries, he argues that the Khasi were able to maintain a relatively peaceful coexistence with the Garo, Karbi, Tiwa, Rabha, and Biate while having good trade relations with Bengal in the south. This he attributed to the adaptive character and the assimilative strength of the Khasi matrilineal system. Under it, different non-Khasi groups

were assimilated within the Khasi community, increasing its numbers while at the same time avoiding inter-ethnic violence to a large extent. For example, the 'Khar' clans emerged when Khasi men took non-Khasi women from the plains as their wives, with their offspring converted into Khasi. On the other hand, non-Khasi men who married Khasi women had to cut off ties with their original families and assimilate into their wives' families and cultures. He gave an example of the Lynggam, who are a group that emerged out of the marriages that took place between Garo and Khasi, the Tiwa and Karbi giving rise to the Bhoi identity, and the possible Pnar (a Khasi sub-group) clans that must have emerged from the marriage between the Pnar and the Biate or Hadem. In short, it was this fluidity of ethnic identity that allowed the Khasi to assimilate the different non-Khasi ethnic groups and maintain a relatively peaceful coexistence. But is the claim of the non-immutability of the ethnic barrier backed by scientific evidence?

Banrida Theresa Langstieh's PhD thesis 'Ethnic and Population Structure of the Lynggam of Meghalaya, India' and her 2012 paper 'Molecular Genetic Perspectives on the Origin of the Lynggam Tribe of Meghalaya, India' have proven the Khasi origin of Lynggam from the mother's side. The father's side comes from the Garo. They are, in other words, a mixed Khasi-Garo group. The fluidity of ethnic identity in the Bhoi region is well documented in Philippe Ramirez's 2017 book 'People of the Margins'. In the Bhoi region, the relationship between the Karbi, Tiwa, and Khasi is guided by trans-ethnic exogamies and surname equivalences. This means that clans cutting across the three ethnic groups do not marry into each other since they are considered to be related by blood, or, in other words, they belong to the same 'Kur'. This happens because many Tiwa and Karbi have converted to Khasi in the past. For example, those who were previously Puma in Tiwa became Umbah in Khasi. To ensure that they do not marry into their original clan in the future, which is taboo, Umbah and Puma, therefore, are considered to be part of the same 'Kur'.

Now that it has been established that the Khasi are a product of the interaction with multiple non-Khasi groups, can we find out how much of the mixing has actually happened? How many of the present population carry the legacy of the original migrants who came to the sub-continent 5,000 years ago? Recent work on genetics has given a hint of a possible number. The debate around the origin of the Austro-asiatic speakers was finally laid to rest in 2010 with the paper 'Population Genetic Structure in Indian

Austro-asiatic Speakers: The Role of Landscape Barriers and Sex-Specific Admixture' by Gyaneshwer Chaubey and colleagues. In it, the East Asian origin of Austro-asiatic speakers was confirmed by looking at the genetic evidence. Table 2 of the paper gives a breakdown of the genetic markers carried by the different Austro-asiatic groups, including the Khasi. About 40% of the Khasi were found to carry the mtDNA (which passes from mothers to their offspring) with a SE Asian origin, while the corresponding number for the Y chromosome (which passes from father to son) was over 70%. This means that 30% to 60% of the present day-Khasi lineages do not come from mainland Southeast Asia, the original homeland of the Khasi. But having a Southeast Asian component in itself does not mean they are connected to the Khasi or Austro-asiatic-speaking populations. SE Asia has at least five different population groups, viz., the Hoabinhian hunter-gatherer who are related to the present-day Onge and Jarawa of Andaman and Nicobar Islands; the Austronesian (Malay, Indonesian, Filipino, and the aborigines of Taiwan); the Austro-asiatic speakers to which Khasi belong; Krai-Dai speaking groups; and those who speak Tibeto-Burman. This break up does not tell if the 70% Y chromosome came from the Austro-asiatic speakers. For that, one has to look at the 2015 paper 'A late Neolithic expansion of Y-chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95 from east to west' by Ganesh Prasad Arunkumar and colleagues.

This paper identified Y-chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95 as the dominant paternal lineage of the Austro-asiatic speakers, making it the genetic marker of the group. Not surprisingly, both the Khasi and the Munda are found to carry this genetic marker, making them distinct from the non-Austro-asiatic speakers. In the present-day Khasi population, around 30% are carrying the Y-chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95. This means that out of the previous 70% SE Asian origin Y chromosome, 40% comes from non-Austro-asiatic speakers or non-Khasi groups. Along with the 40% mtDNA (the same diversity of SE Asian population groups will have to be considered), this suggests that in the present-day Khasi population, not more than 30% can trace their lineage to the original migrants who came from SE Asia. With the permutation and combination required to match those that have both Austro-asiatic mtDNA and Y chromosomes, the number could be even lower. For those who claim the existence of 'pakka Khasi' or 'Khasi by blood', that number will be very small. An overwhelming majority are actually non-Khasi who became Khasi sometime in the past. The mixing began when they were

still in mainland Southeast Asia. In a situation where genes or 'blood' cannot help you define who a Khasi is, what should be the identifying feature of the community? How did our ancestors in the past deal with the question?

The matrilineal system, as it is today, has always been the bedrock of Khasi identity. In the past, the Khasi tried to influence or impose matrilineal culture on groups with whom they came into contact. For this reason, the majority of the Karbi left the domain of Hima Jaintiapur, fearing that they would lose their ethnic and cultural identity under the influence of the Khasi matrilineal culture. The Garo (identified as the Diko by some) appear to have adopted matrilineal customs under the influence of the Khasi.

The other important feature is the language. All those who are today identified as Khasi speak a language that belongs to the Khasian group. Finally, becoming a Khasi requires becoming part of the Khasi clan system, or the 'Teh-Kur'. The equivalence of surnames in Bhoi is the best example of it, as are the various 'Khar' clans. Even the Syiem clan, if we remove the mythical parts of their origin story, can trace their beginning to the marriage of a Khasi man with a non-Khasi woman (Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's novel 'Funeral Nights' gives a tantalizing hint towards that).

So, matrilineal custom, acceptance within the Khasi 'Kur', and language are the defining features of being a Khasi. And since non-Khasi could become Khasi by adopting these three, they are 'potential' Khasi rather than enemies. This could explain the relatively peaceful coexistence that the Khasi had with the neighboring ethnic groups. This flexibility could also be the reason why the community has not fragmented into different smaller groups, like it has happened elsewhere in the North East, where groups that had the same origin in the past are now trying to wipe out each other.

The ability to assimilate other groups, while at the same time maintaining their distinct matrilineal identity, has enabled the Khasi to thrive as a community for the last 5000 years in the subcontinent. At the same time, it allowed them to maintain the cultural ties within their own sub-groups through the oral stories preserved of how the various 'Kur' are related to each other. It is also preserved in the language that, despite having undergone changes and been divided into War, Lynggam, Pnar, and the Sohra Khasi, is still distinctly Khasi. If all three remain, it is certain the Khasi will continue to thrive for the next 5000 years while still maintaining their identity as a distinct community.

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

The Testing Fiasco calls for Radical Reform

By Ajit Ranade

About twenty-five years ago, when Professor Suhas Sukhatme had just completed his term as Director of the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, his interview was published in a national daily. One of the questions that he was asked was what some of the highlights of his five-year tenure as Director were. He promptly gave a one-line answer, "Nobody called me to seek admission for their ward." This answer has deep significance. Firstly, it shows that you can't get admission by influencing the Director. Secondly nobody in the "system" even thinks of calling and using influence. Whether it is ministers, industrialists, politicians or elites, getting IIT admission by any other means apart from an entrance exam was unthinkable. This was simply an unwritten rule, or a norm, that had got implicitly codified over the years. And everyone abided by it. This norm endured because of the trust in the sanctity of the joint entrance exam, and because its integrity was inviolable. In fact, some other institutions like regional engineering colleges piggy backed their admission systems on the JEE ranking because of its integrity. Such a system lasted for about four decades when there were only five IITs, and the number of admissions as well as applicants was manageable, and the exam was administered totally end to end by the IIT's themselves by rotation.

Successive generations of IIT faculty ensured that the sacred norm was sustained, and integrity was not compromised. But that did not last. The gap between supply and demand widened. The premium of getting into IIT zoomed sky high. The coaching class industry made out like bandits. This called for an increase in seat supply. Eventually the number of IIT's proliferated, admissions increased, applicant numbers zoomed. And around 2013 there was intense policy discussion about introducing "one nation, one test" for all the major engineering and medical seats in the country. The motivation was to reduce the hassle for students and parents of running from pillar to post, appearing for multiple entrance exams. It was also to create a uniform standard across the country. There was grave concern about the non-level playing field created by the coaching class industry, and the huge profits that they were skimming. So finally, we did switch over to the "one test" model, with the JEE being split into two stages. A separate agency was set up called the National Testing Agency in 2017, and now the NTA is in charge of conducting the four big exams, namely National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) the gateway to medical seats, the Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) for engineering seats, the University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) and the Centralized University Entrance Test (CUET). The experience of the last few years has not been without hiccups for all these tests. These have led to great anxiety for students and parents. And not to forget the Kota suicides phenomenon related to the inhuman stress on those preparing for the competitive exams, whether JEE or NEET.

This year there is a major controversy about two of the big exams, NEET (undergraduate) and UGC-NET. The latter was scheduled for June 19 and abruptly cancelled with barely one day's notice.

About 0.9 million students across 317 cities were to appear for this exam. The NTA cancelled it because they were concerned about paper leaks. This cancellation came days after the still raging controversy on the NEET-UG whose results were announced on June 4, the same day as results of the national Lok Sabha elections. This exam was taken by 2.4 million students across 571 cities and 4750 centres. But the results seemed absurd. Marks which would have got a rank around 6800 last year, got a rank of 21000. Or marks ranked around 28000 now ranked beyond 80,000. Besides 67 students got a perfect score, with six of these in one same sequence, from the same centre. All this created a lot of disquiet. When scores were shared by parents and applicants on social media, another very unusual phenomenon was discovered, which had not been disclosed by NTA. That 1563 students had received grace marks for which no prior condition had been announced. Grace marks can be given to students with a disability for certain reasons, but in this case, they were given because questions papers reached very late.

By now everything has landed in the Supreme Court. The grace marks have been cancelled, and a retest ordered. But the question remains whether such a benefit should have been made available to all, and not a select few only. This seems unfair. And what about the suspicion of mass leaks, and compromising of NTA's exam machinery? There seems to be a big cheating scam, and some arrests have been made in Bihar and Gujarat. The saga is not over, nor is the untold stress for students and parents.

This fiasco calls for a massive overhaul and reforms. Tests which use Optical Marks Recognition (OMR) require printing, transporting sealed packages and ensuring tamper proof packaging. Such a system is obsolete. Indeed, a prominent government owned testing agency in Maharashtra, migrated to a screen-based system almost fifteen years ago. With tools like AI, and live proctoring software, we don't need to use OMR and all with the attendant risks. The software and AI basis allows dynamic and randomised sequencing, and even paper setters will not know the full exam until it is actually administered. These are all tech-based solutions, which are tried and tested and used even in many places of India. Secondly, we have to find ways to reduce the excessive premium on the one exam, and one national testing body. Either have multiple (at least two) competing standards (for tests), or allow a few private players. Let them compete on the basis of reputation and rigour and integrity. The third long term reform is to reduce the massive demand supply gap, by working on both sides of the equation. This also means unshackling the education sector, allowing greater freedom and autonomy to institutions of higher education, in deciding curricula, courses, faculty hiring and salaries, student fees and programs. Otherwise, millions of our youth are wasting the prime years of their youth with a psychological burden, and grueling study with repeated attempts, to crack exams, where the odds of winning are worse than a lottery.

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

Letters to the Editor

Of irresponsible driving

Editor,
Apropos the letter by DM Pariat on irresponsible driving (ST June 24, 2024) I can't help but pen down some of my own thoughts. It was a coincidence that on the same morning, while dropping my son to school, I witnessed a two-wheeler forcibly overtaking another two-wheeler which was, at that moment itself, overtaking another car; almost resulting in a pile-up. The reckless irresponsible rider then had the audacity to get off his scooter and face up to the other protesting rider, violently berating him instead, looking like he was ready to start a fight. I put in a word, tried telling the chap he was in the wrong and was shocked by his response. He tried to justify himself by saying he was in a big hurry. I didn't try to prolong the conversation, as I was in a hurry to drop my son to school. It occurred to me again, as it does almost daily, that we all seem to forget there are rules of the road we are supposed to abide by, regardless of any urgency we find ourselves in. Everyone seems to think they are the only ones in a hurry and other road users should give way, not bothering to consider the chaos that would ensue should everyone try to force everyone else out of their way.

There had been, not so long back, some tough talk from the police department about coming down heavily on traffic rules violators. It was just that, just talk. Apart from some punitive action taken against a small number of violators, by and large, nothing significant has been done against the multitude who behave like the road is their personal playground or racetrack and people's lives are cheap enough playthings, accident victims mere statistics conveniently forgotten in time. But then, this inaction by the police is very much understandable. Imagine the position policemen find themselves in. On one hand, they are directed to act against violators, while on the other hand, the moment they take action they are bound to encounter violators who are well-heeled and well connected, in which scenario one phone call would suffice to get them off scot-free, with the 'erring' policemen being reprimanded and advised to 'step lightly'. I know this sweeping statement is going to raise some hackles, but we all know this is the ground reality prevailing.

So, now it would be interesting to observe the direction in which this blatant disregard for the rule of law is taking us. Ironically enough, we all still pay lip service to the necessity of teaching our children to be law-abiding and disciplined. What hypocrites we are!

Let truth alone triumph

Editor,
My son and I had been co-leaders of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks for twelve long years. The journey was from April 2003 to March 2015. Many a time, I thought of conveying my heartfelt thanks to the advisers for the NCERT textbooks, especially for the social science books for speaking truth to power.

Hence I am pained at reading reports about pruning of the NCERT textbooks. Chapters on LK Advani's 1990 Rath Yatra and the 2002 Gujarat riots were deleted. Chapters on Mughal kings and the reference to the force behind the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi have also been removed. The class XII political science textbook refers to the Babri Masjid only as a "three-domed structure," built at the birthplace of Lord Ram.

When as a reader of the book, I feel annoyed for such uncalculated surgery on textbooks, it can be understood how much pain the advisors of the books must have undergone. The pain led the chief advisers for the NCERT textbooks, political analysts Yogendra

Yadav and Suhas Palshikar to request the NCERT chief to remove their names from the textbooks. They disagreed with the changes made under their advisory roles and threatened legal action if their names were not removed.

Hiding the truth is against our national motto. The national motto of India is Satyameva Jayate (truth alone triumphs). This mantra from Mundaka Upanishad is inscribed at the base of the Lion Capital of Ashoka. It is an integral part of the Indian national emblem. This emblem along with the words "Satyameva Jayate" is a part of all Indian currency and national documents.

School textbooks should inspire critical thinking. It is dangerous for future citizens of our country if ideological propaganda replaces historical facts. The logic to cut short textbooks to give not just Covid period specific but permanent relief to students does not hold water for two reasons. First, this has distorted history. Second, this logic sounds like the argument used by the diamond king in Satyajit Ray's film, Hiralak Rajar Deshe (Kingdom of Diamonds), "There is no limit to knowledge/ So it is meaningless to try to know."

Initially, I did not bother about the surgery on school textbooks as I thought that it was a Covid-19 specific decision to give relief to students as

they could not physically attend school. Interestingly, a series of surgeries on the NCERT textbooks have been taking place after the Covid period instead of bringing back the deleted chapters.

Similarly, the Railway ministry had me fooled when it withdrew concessions in train fares for senior citizens after a countrywide lockdown was announced due to Covid-19 on March 20, 2020. Previously, the Railways used to offer 50 per cent concession to female and 40 per cent to male senior citizen passengers on train fares. I thought the decision was taken to discourage senior citizens from travelling during the Covid period. But senior citizens have not got back the concessions they used to get in train fares even after Covid.

Now, let us get back to the NCERT surgery and the argument that textbooks, even for the class XII students, should be free from violence and hatred.

The Holocaust is an extreme example of hate and violence. Students are being taught about the Holocaust all over the world so as not to spread violence and hatred but to use the knowledge as an antidote to violence and hatred. This is absolutely necessary to stop a repeat of the tragedy.

Election of Speaker

Editor
The front-page news "VPP MP to skip LS Speaker's election" made interesting reading. CK Nayak's report says that "the election of the Speaker - a first in Independent India," is incorrect as the election for the Speaker's post have been held three times before - the first time in 1952, when there was a contest between GV Mavalankar and Shankar Shantaram, then in 1967 between Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy and Opposition candidates Shankar Shantaram More, Tenniti Vishwanath, Jagannatharao Joshi, and then in 1976, during the Emergency between Baliram Bhagat and Jagannath Rao. In all three cases, the ruling party's nominees, Mavalankar, Bhagat and Reddy, emerged victorious. But to uphold impartiality in a Parliamentary democracy, Dr Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy resigned from the Party. In fact, the Speaker of the 18th Lok Sabha, Om Birla, the MP from Kota should emulate what Reddy did in 1967.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

"Let your hopes, not your hurts,
shape your future."

— Robert H. Schuller

The Shillong Times

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Rise of Rahul

WHAT'S glaring at the outset of the 18th Lok Sabha session this week was the spectacular rise of the Opposition, larger in numbers and its confidence increased. Narendra Modi as Prime Minister will have to guard his words and deeds at every turn, unlike in the last 10 years when he dominated the parliament like a colossus. With a weakened Modi taking the reins for the third time, he will have to contend with the fact that the Congress party as the principal opposition has doubled its numbers to a dignified hundred and rightfully occupies the Leader of Opposition chair, represented by its leader Rahul Gandhi. In the last term, it was a near-total BJP show. This time, the PM needs to tame himself and run the government on the basis of "consensus." His government walks on the crutches of two formidable associates, JDU and Telugu Desam, not to speak of the JDS. The very existence of the present government for a longer duration is not a certainty.

On the Opposition side, with over 230 members in its ranks out of the total 540 in the Lok Sabha which is where the action is, the mood is upbeat. The Opposition was bound to be assertive from day one. This was unlike the last term when they were voiceless, as the principal Opposition – the Congress – itself had only 52 members; or less than one-tenth of the size of the house. Discussions are bound to be heated; and the season of passing bills without discussions will now be a thing of the past.

Like it or not, Rahul Gandhi as a politician has grown by leaps and bounds. This is reflected in his disposition in the house; evident also by the way he "pulled up" Speaker Om Birla at the first opportunity after the latter's re-election, telling him that he erred in his statement against Emergency. The speaker ought to be impartial and cannot take sides. Birla could only grin and bear with the Opposition Leader's tough talk. In Rahul Gandhi's new role, he will sit on house panels opposite to PM Modi and argue the cases out from a position of authority. As Leader of Opposition, he holds the rank of a cabinet minister. Rahul Gandhi, dismissed by many in the past as weak, saw his image rising after the Bharat Jodo Yatra, followed by the Nyay Yatra. These not only raised his clout but also re-energized the Congress and eventually fetched votes for the party. Having brought the party back to this level, Rahul Gandhi's confidence levels are bound to rise further. A strong two-party system, aided by other parties, is a welcome scenario though Bengal's Mamata Banerjee might be miffed.

Letters to the Editor

VPP's strategic move

Editor,
VPP is basically a state party with an aspiration to win power in Meghalaya in the next election. It also aims to gain control of the ADCs in the state. Hence, it has its own political agenda that is also right in a democracy. It's decision to abstain from the Speaker's election was a wise decision as it was a foregone conclusion that Om Birla was sure to win the election due to the numerical strength of NDA. The INDI Alliance also did not press for division of votes after it was decided on voice vote. VPP taking sides at the national politics at this juncture is not at all needed. Voters in Shillong were dissatisfied with the earlier representation, and conveyed a decisive voice through the new political force VPP. The party also has to establish its hold over the entire Meghalaya, particularly in Garo Hills. The party has its own challenges at the state level with the renewed political forces in the state. VPP has to consolidate its hold in Meghalaya, which is a primary concern, rather than aligning with any fluid political combination at the national level. The leaders of VPP are very strategic with a long-term vision. They are here for the longer race in politics and do not subscribe

to political gimmicks and tactics. Hence, the decision of abstaining from Speaker's election was a wise decision. It is also expected with the politically astute and mature leadership of the VPP that it will take its steps in a very calculated manner for the development of Meghalaya. People have lots of expectations from this new political party.

Yours etc.,
Prof. Satya Prakash Dash
NEHU,
Shillong

Rising scourge of drug abuse & illicit trade: A call to action

Editor,
In every generation, societies confront unique challenges, and today, one of the most pressing issues gripping our beloved state is the rampant drug abuse intertwined with an alarming increase in thefts of construction materials. This dual menace is not just a law enforcement issue but a societal crisis that demands immediate attention and concerted action.

In Golf Links, the recent apprehension of a thief stealing iron rods from construction sites in the dead of night sheds light on a deeper problem. When interrogated, the thief confessed that his actions were driven by an

Meghalaya's environment: Are we losing the fight against climate change?

By Patricia Mukhim

There is no doubt that the climate is getting hotter. In cities like Delhi people are getting fried. Add to that the water wars that defy solutions. Compared to the rest of India, Meghalaya is still a paradise and the summer rains have kept the temperatures at a bearable constant of 21-23 degrees centigrade depending on which part of the day we are in. But let's not fool ourselves that the weather will continue to be on our side for long. The Shillong Times story on illegal mining and quarrying should actually send alarm bells ringing. Imagine having 1700 out of 1885 mines/quarries operating illegally! And even after that story appeared, it is business as usual. Sometimes you wonder what will shake up the Government to take a pause out of its money-spinning schemes that it attracts people with and take a call on the environmental degradation that is happening at a rapid pace in Meghalaya.

The question that begs an answer is whether the one Department that is supposedly the custodian of the environment and forests in the State of Meghalaya is in safe hands. Who is manning the Department at the higher echelons? Should the Chief Minister, who holds several important portfolios from Finance, Mining and Geology, Political, Personnel and Information Technology also be in charge of the Department of Environment, Forests and Climate Change. This Department was held by another Sangma brother in the last Government. The Department almost looks like a family estate that cannot be given to any other minister. And the Chief Minister as the minister in charge of this vital department is not even aware that there are 1700 quarries/mines that are going to turn Meghalaya into a flat and barren land soon if there are no checks and balances by civil society activists.

The Department of Forests is itself in a quandary. It lost a fairly senior officer – Manjunath last year to a heart-related problem. The officer was probably working under a lot of stress. Those who know the inside story believe he was used by politicians to carry out their bidding at great cost to the environment and to his own life. There is a need to check out the unsavoury affairs going on in the Forest Colony – an area under the Forest Department and whether that area was denotified to allow for private residential buildings which are coming

up at a rapid pace. Even if the Forest Department does not need that large estate or the existing forests around that place, there should have been a transparent transfer of the land to private owners and not subversive deals as has happened.

On March 13, 2024, Chief Conservator of Forests, N Luikham died of suicide inside his quarters. It was reported that he had spoken to some relative just about an hour before and that he was in fact packing and preparing for his official trip to Delhi. Luikham left no suicide note

company that had ostensibly started an afforestation programme in Meghalaya with an investment of Rs 400 crores and had even set up its office but without having come through the State Government. So how did this Company get its clearances? Is this not a dangerous precedent? Wahlang was candid in stating that a company coming in to invest in Meghalaya is doing so to rake in profits from the carbon credit markets. The question is whether Meghalaya's Forest Department has the expertise to register carbon

"Let me now come to another interesting aspect vis a vis the environment. On June 25, the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB) gave a press statement that as per the Rule 4(2) of the Plastic Waste Management Rules 2016, the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of single use plastics including polystyrene and expanded polystyrene commodities was to be prohibited from July 1, 2022. However the MSPCB received a complaint from the Central Pollution Control Board on June 4, 2024 that single-use plastics were still being manufactured by M/s Jai Plastech Private Ltd."

and it would have been incumbent on the Government to investigate the cause of his death. Did he really die of suicide? Was he pushed by some extraneous circumstances to take his own life? Or what was really the case? No one knows and no one cares. What a remorseless Government this is, unless it is also trying to cover up some trails.

On June 24, the Forest Department organised a training programme on Forest Certification and Carbon Credit where Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Harish C Choudhary informed that Meghalaya has lost 17,000 hectares of forest cover in a span of 6 years from 2014-2020. Choudhary said that 76% of forest cover is open and degraded while a substantial part is occupied by horticulture crops. But more damning than this information is the Chief Secretary, DP Wahlang's warning that the Department should follow due procedures in all cases involving investors in Meghalaya. He mentioned a vaccine manufacturing

credits and other credible registries as well.

What is also a cause of concern about the Forest Department is that a senior official in the Department whose signing powers have been suspended by the Courts due to ongoing investigations against him, is still deciding important matters whereas other officers are made to sign on those papers. This is subterfuge as its worst. Why can't the Chief Minister as executive head of the Department not put adequate safeguards on this duplicity? And why must Meghalaya harbour such officers as if there is a famine of forest officials?

Let me now come to another interesting aspect vis a vis the environment. On June 25, the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB) gave a press statement that as per the Rule 4(2) of the Plastic Waste Management Rules 2016, the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of single use plastics including polystyrene and expanded polystyrene commodities

was to be prohibited from July 1, 2022. However the MSPCB received a complaint from the Central Pollution Control Board on June 4, 2024 that single-use plastics were still being manufactured by M/s Jai Plastech Private Ltd. The MSPCB inspected the premises of the aforesaid company and found that it was still manufacturing single use plastics. The entire stock of plastics and raw material weighing 0.95 tonnes was seized by the MSPCB and the Company was fined Rs 4.28 lakh.

Again this is a bit strange considering that the MSPCB is expected to carry out regular inspections of the industrial areas to check the pollution levels of those spaces. How did this unit escape the attention of the State Pollution Agency? And don't tell us that the MSPCB officials or their wives don't go marketing and haven't seen those black plastic bags being freely distributed since 2022? Above all, Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma had promised some school students way back in 2019 that single use plastics which are toxic to the environment would be banned. That never happened even while the students look on in bewilderment at an unfulfilled promise.

It is tragic indeed that a state that is trying to promote tourism and relies heavily on its environment is ignoring these dangerous signs where forest cover is disappearing at a frenetic pace. The more ethical question is - What are we leaving behind for our children and grand-children? It is my considered opinion that most of the high level elites in the government today will not be settling down in Meghalaya. Their children are studying abroad and when life here becomes unlivable they will shift base to greener pastures. They have amassed enough wealth to do so. Those who will suffer the consequences are those who voted these privileged ones to hold positions of responsibility even as we are left to confront our own frailty and fallibility. Indeed, the price we pay for our errors is higher than the benefits we gain from our small successes.

To be thinking of all these human-induced consequences and the relentless assault on the environment is to brutalize our souls. But we have to keep it at. Ancient wisdom speaks of scepticism of the head and audacity of the heart. That's how we have to brave the anti-climate brigands. We may not win the climate war but we will continue to fight the small battles.

future for generations to come.

Yours etc.,
Khrawpyrkhat David
Mynsong
Shillong

On stand-alone MPs

Editor,
The editorial "Non-aligned MP in Parliament" (ST 27, 2024) made interesting reading. When a Member in Parliament in the Lok Sabha abstains from voting during the election of the Speaker, it can imply few things: The MP may choose to remain neutral, not favouring any candidate. This could be due to personal reasons or a desire to maintain impartiality. Sometimes MPs abstain strategically. They may withhold their vote to signal dissatisfaction with both candidates or to negotiate for future favours or positions. In a hung Parliament or when party lines are blurred, MPs may abstain if their party has not officially endorsed a candidate or if they want to avoid internal conflicts. The MP might abstain due to moral or ethical reasons, refusing to support either candidate. However, abstaining from voting does not necessarily indicate indifference; it can reflect complex political dynamics or individual convictions. Implications apart, in order to promote his ideas and

policies an MP has to engage in lobbying and persuade other MPs to support specific issues through letter-writing, emails or social media communication. Then there is a need for networking and building relationships. Networking helps a member of Parliament collaborate with like-minded MPs, regardless of party affiliations. Members of Parliament can form cross-party alliances to advance shared causes and address common concerns.

By networking, Members of Parliament increase their visibility within Parliament. This recognition can lead to opportunities to speak, propose amendments and contribute to legislative processes. In the case of Dr Syngkon, Member of Parliament, the editorial rightly pointed out that "pragmatism dictates that implementing the VPP's manifesto would require all the negotiating skills of the new MP which also means the support of the ruling party – the NDA. It would necessarily mean constantly lobbying for those demands. How Dr Syngkon manages the balancing act will be keenly watched by political observers across the spectrum".

Your etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

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Some dramatic Indian shifts amid changing geopolitics

By R K Pattnaik

India's geo-economic and geopolitical ambitions are growing, and with it has come a shift that challenges long-held, time-tested positions and alignments that have been built during the Nehruvian era and have been strengthened over the first 75 years of the republic. This change in India's positions is probably best seen in the growing closeness to the Israeli regime of Benjamin Netanyahu which has been accused of a continued and relentless genocide in Gaza. There isn't much consensus on this deep policy change internally in India.

The need for consensus is probably less felt in areas of foreign policy, geopolitics and geo-economics, all of which aren't the hot topic of discussion in the country. The average citizen or student isn't typically engaged in the nuances of foreign policy, trade relations or political leanings and their interplay with economics. Yet, the significance of this shift needs to be underlined, as also a lack of debate or consensus in India on the realignment that is distinctly underway. This comes at a difficult time in global affairs.

Consider that the RBI Annual Report for 2023-24 released last month has emphasised escalating geopolitical tensions, rising geo-economic fragmentation and the inefficiencies that this brings in a world where globalisation appears to be in retreat. "Geopolitics" and "geo-economics" as terms appear 16 times in the RBI annual report dated May 30, 2024 (Part I: Assessment and Prospects, more than the number of times seen in the previous year), a pointer to how economics is being constrained by politics in the context of the demands and exigencies of geopolitics. The emphasis (or overemphasis as some might call this) tells us that an entire gamut of issues, like the external sector which comprises trade, capital flows and currency movements, crude prices and their movement, global financial markets, global inflation and the foreign exchange market, are so deeply interwoven globally that any retreat from the principles of globalisation into an era of deglobalisation will bring big new and serious economic challenges. Yet, these challenges are coming in a world riddled with rising tensions and the potential threat of closing of borders, a reinforcement of national agendas, and priorities of a strong nation-state as a force against globalisation and multilateralism. As the RBI report noted: "Global financial conditions tightened amidst heightened volatility in response to synchronised monetary policy tightening as well as aggravating geopolitical conflicts."

We see that already "trade and investment flows are being redirected along geopolitical lines," according to the first Deputy Managing Director of the IMF, Gita Gopinath. In her May 2024 speech ("Geopolitics and its Impact on Global Trade and the Dollar") at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, she noted that China's share in U.S. imports declined by eight percentage points and the U.S. share in China's exports dropped by about four percentage points between 2017 and 2023 following a flare-up in trade tensions. Direct trade between Russia and the West collapsed following the conflict with Ukraine and subsequent sanctions on Russia.

Geopolitical tensions are of course not new; they surfaced during the World Wars and resurfaced during the 1970s in the form of a Cold War between the then superpowers, USA and the Soviet Union. The economic consequence of this manifested in the patterns and directions of foreign trade, cross-border capital flows, currency movements and migration of labour. The collapse of the USSR, the emergence of China as a new economic power, the formation of the European Union, the emergence of USA as a hegemon and most recently, new questions on the Israel-Palestinian conflict that is increasingly being seen as genocide has resulted in a paradigm change in the world political and economic order, threatening multilateral co-operation and multilateral systems

of economic governance.

These developments have consequently posed a threat to international peace, security and political stability. The world economic order faces a transformation from public expenditure on developmental and welfare-oriented programmes to a higher level of defence expenditure.

The term "geo-economics" was first used by Edward Luttwak in 1990. Luttwak argued that cold war ideological rivalries have been replaced worldwide by economic competition, in which trade and finance overshadow military power. Geo-economics as a branch of knowledge emerged from geopolitics as international economic relations are guided by political relations. To quote the old English proverb, "trade follows the flag and the flag follows the trade", which was first used in the context of colonies when it was coined by E. Cobham Brewer in 1894, but is now used to highlight a co-movement of politics and economics. Yet, as some will argue, the underlying baggage of colonisation is unchanged, with global business as the new occupying force in which India, too, wants a share of the pie!

Among the BRICS countries, China has emerged as a new economic power and geopolitical force, giving us the IMF classification of blocs as USA-leaning countries, China-leaning countries and non-aligned countries. China has occupied a position for itself in geopolitics. Reflecting this, the Chinese currency Renminbi has been included in the basket of currencies by IMF. Besides, the foreign currency reserves of China stood at US\$3.2 trillion (April 2024), an indication of its growing financial muscle in the global order. Russia with crude oil reserves (geo-economic leverage) and a strong military base (geo-political leverage) is geo-politically sensitive. India's position in the context of geo-politics is its commitment to maintain a harmonious economic and political relationship with both USA and Russia. This is evident from the revival of Rupee trade with Russia. With regards to USA, India's total foreign trade during 2022-23 accounted for 24.44% of the total (17.41% share in exports and share in 7.03% imports). India's trade with China accounted for 17.18% of the total foreign trade (3.39% share in exports and 6.47% share in imports).

Broadly, in the blocs as mentioned above, where does India stand? Is it USA-leaning, China-leaning, non-aligned or ready for partnerships everywhere and anywhere? The official stance is that India's foreign policy objective is to move to multi-alignment from the conventional non-alignment leaning. This is corroborated by India's foreign trade data during 2022-2023, as published by the RBI. Excluding USA and China, India's foreign trade to other countries accounted for 58.38% of the total foreign trade during 2022-23, of which the share of the European Union in foreign trade was 21.70%, and OPEC countries 33.4%. As against this, a decade ago (2013-14) the share of total foreign trade excluding USA and China, was 83.3% of which the share of the European Union in foreign trade was 13.24%, and OPEC countries 31.26%. As it may be seen, over the decade, India's trade relations with USA and China have grown to 41.62% in 2022-23 versus 16.7% in 2013-24, indicating a tilt.

In sum, efficiency gains from trade specialisation and globalisation are under threat from retreating globalisation. As the IMF notes: "While rebuilding trust is difficult and may take time, it is critical to avoid the worst outcomes in a rapidly fragmenting world. It is well-worth it to preserve some of the enormous gains from economic integration that have made the world more prosperous and more secure."

India is working to rediscover itself in this phase and the shifts we see are nothing short of dramatic.

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"Success breeds complacency. Complacency breeds failure. Only the paranoid survive."

— Andy Grove

The Shillong Times

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Criminal laws decolonised

ON June 27, the Press Information Bureau (PIB) and the Meghalaya Police organised a discussion on the three new criminal laws, namely the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and the Bharatiya Sakshya Sanhita that are set to replace the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and the Indian Evidence Act, respectively, with effect from July 1, 2024. The discussion was to throw light on the vital aspects of the three reformed criminal laws. The audience comprised media persons, law students and lawyers. In essence, the new or reformed laws would replace the colonial laws and with them the western ethical mores upon which the laws were drafted. Police officials lauded the new laws stating they were citizen-friendly and justice-centric since FIRs could now be filed via the online mode and from anywhere in the country (zero FIR). The laws will rely heavily on technology. Citizens filing FIRs now can follow online their case statuses and ask the police for the progress of investigation of those cases. Cases would now also be resolved in a time bound manner thereby doing away with the infamous "tareekh pe tareekh," saga that has long ailed the judiciary in India.

However, even before the D-date has arrived some lawyers have approached the Supreme Court praying for specific directions to immediately constitute an expert committee for assessing and identifying the viability of the three new criminal laws. An additional petition has also been filed asking for a stay on the operation and implementation of three new criminal laws. The petitioners contend that the titles of the current laws are not accurate. They stated that as per the interpretation of statutes, the titles of these proposed bills do not clearly reflect the statutes and their motive. Instead, the current names of the Acts are ambiguous. Apart from this, the petitioners contend that there were discrepancies in the Acts. Regarding BNS, they said, it retains most offences from the IPC. Further, BNS defines petty organised crime as an offence. This includes vehicle theft, pickpocketing, selling public examination question papers, and other forms of organized crimes committed by gangs. To be considered as such, these crimes must (i) cause a general feeling of insecurity among citizens and (ii) be committed by organized criminal groups or gangs, including mobile organised crime groups. The petitioners stated that the Bills were passed without any proper parliamentary debate as 141 MPs from the Opposition were under suspension. This has led to arbitrary passage of the Bills with no challenges.

The petitioners pointed to former Chief Justice NV Ramana's concerns in 2021 regarding enactment of laws without proper debate. The former Chief Justice had said, "Parliamentary debate is a fundamental part of democratic lawmaking. In parliament, members' debate bills before they vote on them. Because debates are public, they provide Members of Parliament (MPs) an opportunity to represent the views of constituents on the floor and give voice to voters' concerns." Amongst other issues the petitioners expressed concern at the admissibility of electronic records since the process lacks safeguards to prevent tampering and contamination of these records during the investigation process.

Gendered Poverty in a Matrilineal State

By E Revathi and Govind Kelkar

Meghalaya is a matrilineal society with land and lineage in the women's names. The youngest daughter (ka khadduh) inherits the family land and house, and she is the custodian of it, also bestowed with the responsibility of taking care of her parents and other family members. The female labour force participation rate in the state is the highest in the country at around 60%. Agriculture engages 80% of the population in 4.5 lakh households in the state but contributes around 18% to GVA (Gross Value Added). One can easily perceive from this scenario, that the per capita income of those depending on agriculture is very low compared to the state per capita income. Landlessness has been growing in the state for the past two decades or even more. According to the SECC (Socio-economic Caste Census) 2011 data only 24% of households own any land in the state. The more recent NFHS 5 data show that 65% of women owned a house or land alone or jointly with others. From the growing landlessness, it could be understood that women mostly owned houses and not land. Around 34% of rural landless tribal households derive a major part of their income from manual labour.

Meghalaya ranked 3rd in the percentage of the total population who are multi-dimensionally poor at 27.79%, only after Jharkhand and Bihar, according to the National Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MDPI) Report 2023. The MDPI, a non-income poverty measure is based on the NFHS 5 (National Family Health Survey) data collected during 2019-21. The reduction in MDP compared to earlier NFHS 4 (2015-16) is marginal at 4.75%. It was 32.54% in NFHS 4 and reduced marginally. Generally, a higher population in poverty would also mean a faster reduction in poverty numbers, but the case of Meghalaya has been an exception. While the headcount ratio has fallen, the intensity of poverty has stubbornly remained the same. The MDPI has fallen because of a reduction in the headcount ratio but not due to a fall in the intensity of poverty.

Multi-dimensional poverty and its indicators: The MDPI has three dimensions—health and nutrition, education, and standard of living, each contributing equally to the index. The number of indicators varies—while the health dimension has three indicators (nutrition, child

& adolescent mortality and maternal health); education has two indicators (years of schooling and school attendance); standard of living has the maximum number of seven indicators (cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, housing, electricity, assets and bank accounts). The MDPI is measured in two components viz- HCR (headcount ratio) and the intensity of poverty. The MDPI has been assessed for the first time as a baseline in 2015-16 using NFHS 4 data, the subsequent editions are comparable to assess the improvement or decline in multi-dimensional poverty.

Multi-dimensional poverty in the State: An analysis of the multi-dimensional poverty in the state shows it is higher in rural areas, but the intensity of poverty has increased in urban areas compared to rural areas. A further dive into the indicators shows that the state has not fared well in nutrition and maternal health, education in both indicators of years of schooling and school attendance and housing (under the standard of living dimension). Still, around a fifth of the population is deprived of nutrition, maternal health, cooking fuel and housing. The under-5 mortality rate is as high as 40, with an Infant Mortality rate of 32 and a neo-natal mortality rate of 19.8, according to NFHS 5 data.

Among the three major tribes of the state—the Khasis, Jaintia and the Garo, the Jaintia tribe living in the West Jaintia Hills district ranked lowest, with a high MDPI (poorest) followed by Khasis in the West Khasi district. East Jaintia Hills district and South West Khasi also rank low after West Jaintia and West Khasi Hills districts. Garo community has the lowest MDPI in the state, indicating a lower percentage of a multi-dimensionally poor population. Ribhoi district, which had the highest MDPI in 2015-16, could improve its performance in lowering the number of poor by 14% in 2019-20. This may be due to the fertile lands and its good productivity, earning it the name 'food basket' of Meghalaya.

Loss of land and livelihoods: The structure of land holdings has been undergoing transformation. Clan land meant for the use of clan members and community land meant for the use of members of the village

or group of villages have been on the decline. Major chunks of such land have been converted into private land with the support and/or connivance of Village Council leaders or distributed among the powerful clan members. An elite class has emerged, especially among Khasis and Jaintias, which could control land by way of private property, especially in urban areas. Land has also been given by the Autonomous District Councils, which have control over land for mining, buildings, roads and other infrastructure—broadly for development purposes to the Government. As most of the development projects or activities are predominantly male, they could get employed in such activities. Landlessness among households implies women became landless as land mostly is in the name of women. Thus, women left with no land either work on leased land with a very low share left for themselves as they have to part with at least 50% of produce to the land owner or alternatively are forced to work as casual labour in farm or non-farm sector in rural areas with daily wages anywhere between INR 250-300, while men get INR 500.

Data shows that only 40 per cent who worked in the last 12 months were paid in cash; in the case of others, it is mostly unpaid labour. Most of the women work in the informal sectors like petty trade, street vending and so on, with inadequate and unstable incomes. Moreover, women bear the brunt of unpaid care and domestic work. According to NFHS 5 data, 16.9% of women married before they were 18 years old; the total fertility rate or children per woman was 2.9 (higher than the national average at 2); teenaged mothers account for 7.2%; 54% of women aged 15-49 years are anaemic. Increasingly, women have become single parents due to the 'brittleness' of marriage in the matrilineal system.

The 'Exploratory Study on the Socio-Economic Status and Problems of Single Mothers in Meghalaya' conducted by the State Commission for Women in 2022, reports there were 3,078 single mothers in seven of the 12 districts surveyed. Their level of education is low—46.2% of them were illiterate while 28.4% just had only primary education. The loose structure of marriage with fluid relations

between men and women more as partners leaves scope for men deserting or abandoning wives and children and not taking care of them. Polygyny is still not uncommon. Women carry the burden of running a family. All these point towards what is called 'gendered poverty', where poverty is more concentrated among women, who are ill-equipped—with low levels of education, informal employment, unstable incomes, malnourished and burdened with family care. Moreover, women are unable to articulate their needs and demands due to the culture of keeping them out of village/community decision-making—the Dorbar Shnong. Women, however, are excluded from participation in the traditional political system. Only men are allowed to hold office in the Dorbar Shnong.

The way forward: Poor women are indeed at a crossroads with neither clan nor community support nor family support. The coming together of women may show a way towards collective activity in the form of Self-help groups (SHGs). Elsewhere in the country, especially in the southern states, SHGs have made a rapid stride in bringing women together, primarily catering to their economic needs but also expanding their space into social and political spheres. What is urgent today for the poor women in the state is to give them a stable livelihood which may eventually prevent inter-generational poverty. Coming together of women may also lead to a new thinking of claiming their space in governance structures changing adverse social norms of their exclusion from decision-making. Many in the women's movement have been arguing for women's unmediated right to land as a critical component of women's socio-political equality. However, the example of Meghalaya shows women's land rights is only half of the story. The two other critical components of such empowerment are women's equal participation in the decision-making at the community level and at state structures of governance in ending both gendered poverty and discriminatory social norms.

(E Revathi is a Development Economist and Director Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad and Govind Kelkar is Executive Director and Professor of GenDev, Centre for Research and Innovation based in Gurgaon).

President Droupadi Murmu braves pitfalls in Modi gov't narrative Rejuvenated INDIA bloc will find many loopholes in her address to joint session

By Sushil Kutty

President Droupadi Murmu must have known the moment she woke up that she would be mentioning "my government" again and again when she addresses the joint session of Parliament. It is another presidential chore—addressing joint sessions of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, reading out aloud the speech written for her by the government of the day which she did on June 27.

The President of India is restricted in choices. Addressing joint sessions of Parliament and speaking on behalf of "my government" is part of the deal. The President of India, even if she wants to, can-

and the "aspirations of people".

She urged "healthy competition between states"—with what she called "the spirit of competitive-cooperative federalism", repeating Prime Minister Narendra Modi's favourite line that, "India has become the world's fifth-largest economy."

President Murmu spoke all that the NDA government wrote for her, which was basically Prime Minister Modi's achievements during the 10 years of BJP rule when he was at the helm. It was about Modi 1.0 and Modi 2.0. Billar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu had nothing to gloat about in the President's Address. Their time will come next year if the NDA government is still around a year from today.



not speak her mind. The "my government" this time was the NDA government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. That is to say, the "my government" could have been a Rahul Gandhi-led INDI-Alliance government.

But it wasn't and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's NDA government got a chance to stamp BJP's agenda all over the President's Address as the President adjusted to the flow of the script given to her. She spoke of the upcoming budget, which if it would be different from earlier Sitharaman budgets, would be scintillating.

Some of the words in the address reminded people of Modi wanting to "change the Constitution". It also struck people that President Droupadi Murmu's address had been weaponized to take on the suddenly empowered Opposition.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's frustration at not getting "abki baar 400 paar" has been on most everybody's lips since June 4, election results day, and Modi's alleged designs on the Constitution of India was cited as one of the more prominent reasons why Prime Minister Narendra Modi got "reduced to a minority".

Realizing the hole he was in, the BJP picked on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's "tanashahi 1975 Emergency" to hit back at the Congress. In both the narratives, the government and the opposition's, the Constitution of India is the common factor. But the BJP had to go back in time, 49 years to be exact, and resurrect Indira Gandhi to accuse the Congress of doing the greatest harm to the Constitution, whereas Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a sitting duck right here and now.

If there was one thing which every opposition MP carried to Parliament in this 18th Lok Sabha, it was a slim hardcover of the Constitution of India. The majority of the Opposition MPs took the oath on the statute book, except AIMIM's Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi who couldn't get hold of a copy of the Constitution of Palestine.

Of course, President Murmu highlighted the Budget and the many historic steps in the offing, both economic and social, in her address. She spoke of the "speed of the reforms"

And when she spoke of the NEET, she couldn't do anything else other than promising exemplary punishment to those behind the paper leak. With the Narendra Modi-led NDA government both tongue-tied and hog-tied, President Droupadi Murmu had to "my government" with a great deal less enthusiasm when she spoke on NEET.

The NEET UG-2024 mess and the controversy surrounding the Constitution of India, allegations that the BJP-led NDA government continued to be a threat to BR Ambedkar's vision for India, left Prime Minister Narendra Modi little leeway to come up with a more uplifting Presidential Address for President Murmu to read aloud.

Whether the Modi government succeeded in mitigating his government's role in the NEET paper leak will be known when the results for Jharkhand, Haryana and Maharashtra assembly election results are announced. Till then, the BJP will be on tenterhook. That the BJP is against government recruitments is known far and wide.

President Murmu served the Modi Government's purpose when she raised the "imposition of Emergency in 1975", noting that it was "the biggest and darkest chapter" of Indian parliamentary history, what she referred to as "direct attack on the Constitution." For the Modi government, this was sweet revenge. The INDI-Alliance's continued attacks on Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his alleged designs on the Constitution had left the Prime Minister looking bloodless and pale. The "Constitution War" between the BJP and the INDIA bloc is not going to end anytime soon. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Takeways from Speaker election drama

Editor,
The third day of the first session of the 18th Lok Sabha saw a protest by the INDIA bloc in the form of election for the post of Speaker. The Ruling alliance and the Opposition alliance failed to reach a consensus after the Ruling side failed to guarantee the post of Deputy Speaker to the Opposition.

Whereas in the morning of the third day, the INDIA bloc's candidate, Congress M.P. Kodikkunal Suresh affirmed that INDIA bloc is united, and therefore will ask for a division of votes in the house.

At home, many were asking the Shillong MP Dr Ricky Syngkon not to abstain from voting. When it was confirmed that the MP was going to abstain, we saw virile criticisms from some sections that abstention amounted to support of the Ruling alliance, and even more virile accusations that the MP and his party are supporting BJP and even Hindutva ideology, by the mere act of abstaining from voting for the Speaker.

But when all was said and done and the dust had

settled, the Speaker was actually elected unanimously, because after the voice votes were recorded, the INDIA bloc never called for a division of votes. There were no paper votes, as the whole exercise proved to be merely a symbolic protest by the Opposition bloc. But what is more telling is that there are reports that some individual MPs in the Opposition actually objected to the unanimous election of Om Birla as the Speaker and called for division of votes.

So, why did neither the Ruling alliance nor the Opposition bloc call for a division of votes, when as many as eight MPs, according to some reports, objected to the election and had called for it? The takeaway is that the INDIA bloc is not as united as those who criticised the Shillong MP think it to be. The Opposition alliance itself did not take the objection of some MP's seriously. It was always a symbolic exercise that was never going to see paper votes being cast. And at the end of the day, when the dust had settled, the INDIA bloc and the Ruling alliance elected the Speaker unanimously, with no objection.

So, the Shillong MP happened to be on the right side of this futile and symbolic drama, and I applaud his stance, despite the strong and

virile criticisms. So, I appeal to all sections of the State to be more mature in their public statements and not be so reactionary or hyperbolic in their statements, as it is in this case, the drama was much ado about nothing. Let us support or criticize our MP within reason.

Yours etc.,
Kitor H. Blah,
Via email

Lessons from the Emergency

Editor,
Apropos the news item "Reference to Emergency could have been avoided, Rahul tells Speaker" (ST June 28, 2024). The decision of the Speaker, Lok Sabha to raise historical issues can be a matter of debate. The Speaker's role is to maintain decorum, ensure smooth proceedings, and uphold parliamentary rules. If the issue being raised has direct relevance to current affairs, governance or constitutional matters, it may be appropriate. Sometimes, revisiting historical events can serve as a reminder of past mistakes or achievements. It can inform lawmakers and citizens about consequences of certain actions. However, if the Speaker raises old issues purely for political gains or

to divert attention, it may not be in the best interest of parliamentary functioning. Ultimately the appropriateness depends on the specific context, intent, and impact of raising the issue. Transparency, fairness and adherence to parliamentary norms should guide such decisions.

The Emergency of 1975 in India offers crucial lessons for politicians and democratic governance. The three takeaways are (a) imposition of Emergency demonstrated the dangers of concentrating power in the hands of a single leader (b) politicians should prioritize democratic principles, people's participation, and adherence to constitutional norms (c) despotism has no place in a healthy democracy. The ambiguity surrounding the Emergency provision in the Constitution was evident during 1975. Policy makers must ensure that emergency powers are used judiciously and only in cases of armed rebellion or external aggression. Clarity and transparency in legal provisions are essential.

The Emergency made citizens acutely aware of their rights and civil liberties. Politicians should uphold these fundamental rights and avoid undermining constitutional organs like the judiciary. Public awareness and vigilance are critical for

safeguarding democracy. Therefore, politicians should learn from history and prioritizing democratic values, legal clarity, and citizens' rights to prevent any recurrence of such dark episodes in future.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

Restore Bangalkata's Power Now

Editor,
I am writing to draw attention to the severe hardships faced by the residents of Bangalkata village in the Phulbari constituency due to prolonged electricity outage. For the past 13 days, our village has been without power, causing significant disruption to our daily lives.

Phulbari constituency is represented by the Power Minister of Meghalaya, Mr. A.T. Mondal, which makes this situation particularly concerning. Despite repeated appeals to the local authorities, no substantive action has been taken to resolve this issue.

The electricity outage has severely impacted various aspects of our lives:

1. Education: This is the time for half-yearly exami-

nations, and students are finding it extremely difficult to study without proper lighting. Absence of electricity is hindering their preparation, which could adversely affect their academic performance.

2. Healthcare: The local health centre is unable to function effectively, putting the health and lives of villagers at risk.

3. Agriculture: Farmers are facing difficulties in irrigating their fields, which could lead to crop failure and subsequent financial losses.

4. Daily Life: The absence of electricity has disrupted basic activities, including food preservation and communication, leading to a decline in the quality of life.

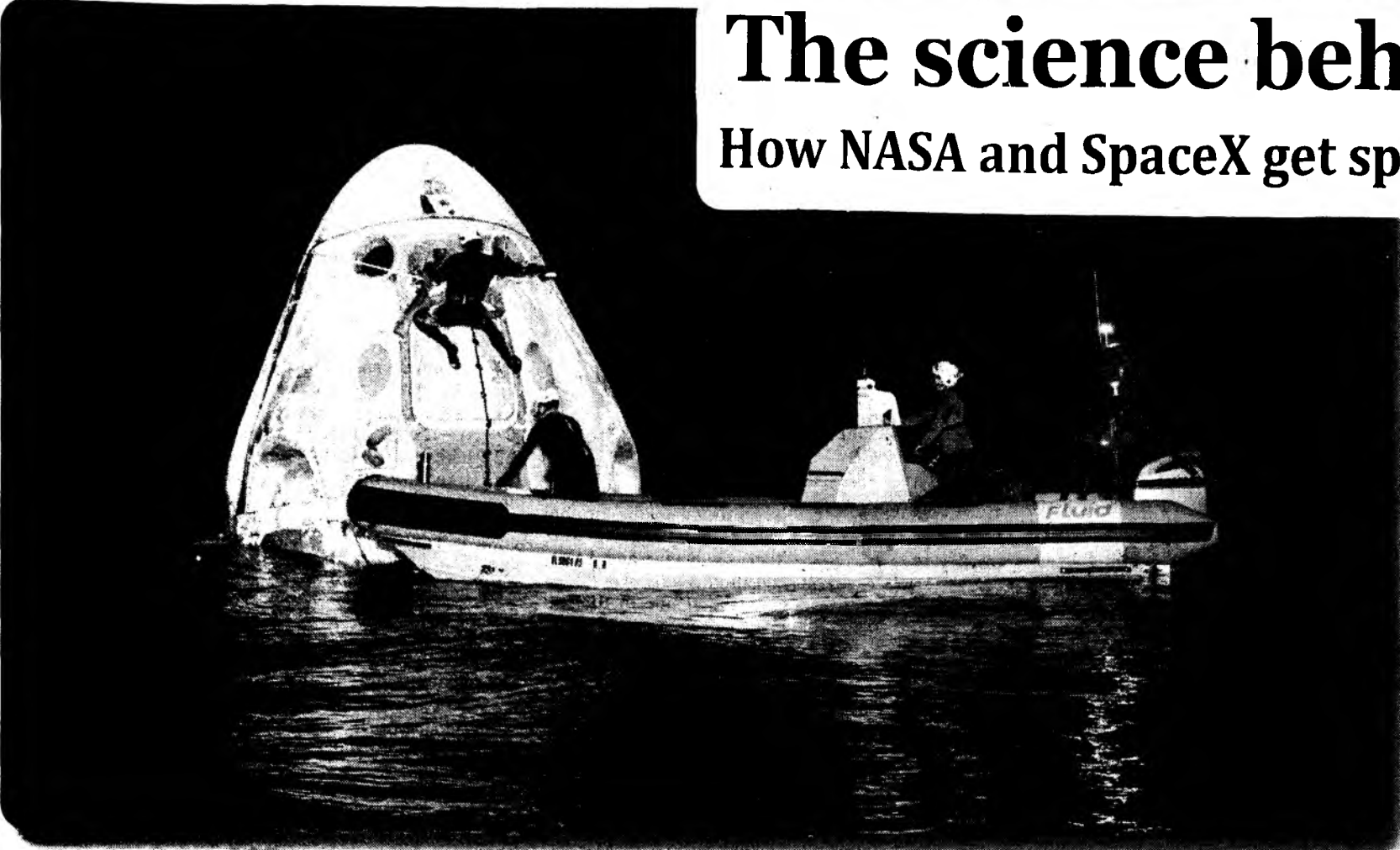
We request the Power Minister to respond to our call and to take immediate action to restore electricity in Bangalkata village. We deserve to get equal treatment in terms of power supply as the people of Shillong and other district headquarters get.

Yours etc.,
Tauqer Hassan,
Bangalkata Village,
Phulbari

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

The science behind splashdown

How NASA and SpaceX get spacecraft safely back on Earth



Support teams work around the SpaceX Crew Dragon Resilience spacecraft shortly after it landed with NASA astronauts Mike Hopkins, Shannon Walker, and Victor Glover, and Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) astronaut Soichi Noguchi aboard in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Panama City, Florida, on May 2, 2021. (AP)

For about 15 minutes on July 21, 1961, American astronaut Gus Grissom felt at the top of the world - and indeed he was.

Grissom crewed the Liberty Bell 7 mission, a ballistic test flight that launched him through the atmosphere from a rocket. During the test, he sat inside a small capsule and reached a peak of over 100 miles up before splashing down in the Atlantic Ocean.

A Navy ship, the USS Randolph, watched the successful end of the mission from a safe distance. Everything had gone according to plan, the controllers at Cape Canaveral were exultant, and Grissom knew he had just entered a VIP club as the second American astronaut in history.

Grissom remained inside his capsule and swayed on the gentle

ocean waves. While he waited for a helicopter to take him onto the USS Randolph's dry deck, he finished recording some flight data. But then, things took an unexpected turn.

An incorrect command in the capsule's explosives system caused the hatch to pop out, which let water flow into the tiny space. Grissom had also forgotten to close a valve in his spacesuit, so water began to seep into his suit as he fought to stay afloat.

After a dramatic escape from the capsule, he struggled to keep his head above the surface while giving signals to the helicopter pilot that something had gone wrong. The helicopter managed to save him at the last instant.

Grissom's near-death escape remains one of the most dramatic splashdowns in history. But splash-

ing down into water remains one of the most common ways astronauts return to Earth.

Fortunately, most splashdowns are not quite that nerve-racking, at least on paper.

Splashdown explained

Before it can perform a safe landing, a spacecraft returning to Earth needs to slow down.

While it is careening back to Earth, a spacecraft has a lot of kinetic energy. Friction with the atmosphere introduces drag, which slows down the spacecraft.

The friction converts the spacecraft's kinetic energy to thermal energy, or heat.

All this heat radiates out into the surrounding air, which gets really, really hot. Since reentry velocities can be several times the speed of

sound, the force of the air pushing back against the vehicle turns the vehicle's surroundings into a scorching flow that's about 2,700 degrees Fahrenheit (1,500 degrees Celsius).

In the case of SpaceX's massive Starship rocket, this temperature even reaches 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit (nearly 1,700 degrees Celsius).

Unfortunately, no matter how quickly this transfer happens, there's still not enough time during reentry for the vehicle to slow down to a safe enough velocity not to crash. So, the engineers resort to other methods that can slow down a spacecraft during splashdown.

Parachutes are the first option. NASA typically uses designs with bright colours, such as orange, which make them easy to spot.

They're also huge, with diameters of over 100 feet, and each reentry vehicle usually uses more than one for the best stability.

The first parachutes deployed, called drag parachutes, eject when the vehicle's velocity falls below about 2,300 feet per second (700 metres per second).

Even then, the rocket can't crash against a hard surface. It needs to land somewhere that will cushion the impact. Researchers figured out early on that water makes an excellent shock absorber. Thus, splashdown was born.

Why water?

Water has a relatively low viscosity - that is, it deforms fast under stress - and it has a density much lower than hard rock. These two qualities make it ideal for landing spacecraft. But the other main reason water works so well is because it covers 70 per cent of the planet's surface, so the chances of hitting it are high when you're falling from space.

The science behind splashdown is complex, as a long history proves.

In 1961, the US conducted the first crewed splashdowns in history. These used Mercury reentry capsules.

These capsules had a roughly conical shape and fell with the base toward the water. The astronaut inside sat facing upward. The base absorbed most of the heat, so researchers designed a heat shield that boiled away as the capsule shot through the atmosphere.

As the capsule slowed and the friction reduced, the air got cooler, which made it able to absorb the excess heat on the vehicle, thereby cooling it down as well. At a sufficiently low speed, the parachutes would deploy.

Splashdown occurs at a velocity of about 80 feet per second (24 metres per second). It's not exactly a smooth impact, but that's slow

enough for the capsule to thwack into the ocean and absorb shock from the impact without damaging its structure, its payload or any astronauts inside.

Following the Challenger loss in 1986, when the space shuttle Challenger broke apart shortly after lift-off, engineers started focusing their vehicle designs on what's called the crashworthiness phenomena - or the degree of damage a craft takes after it hits a surface.

Now, all vehicles need to prove that they can offer a chance of survival on water after returning from space.

Researchers build complex models, then test them with laboratory experiments to prove that the structure is sturdy enough to meet this requirement.

Onto the future

Between 2021 and June 2024, seven of SpaceX's Dragon capsules performed flawless splashdowns on their return from the International Space Station.

On June 6, the most powerful rocket to date, SpaceX's Starship, made a phenomenal vertical splashdown into the Indian Ocean.

Its rocket boosters kept firing while approaching the surface, creating an extraordinary cloud of hissing steam surrounding the nozzles.

SpaceX has been using splashdowns to recover its boosters after launch, with no significant damage to their critical parts, so that it can recycle them for future missions. Unlocking this reusability will allow private companies to save millions of dollars in infrastructure and reduce mission costs.

Splashdown continues to be the most common spacecraft reentry tactic, and with more space agencies and private companies shooting for the stars, we're likely to see plenty more take place in the future. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, June 30, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Mercury on your solar return chart indicates a mixed year. In order to avoid feeling stuck or suffocated, it is advised to express yourself with a class that stimulates your artistic side. You possess a natural psychic gift, and you'll be encouraged to explore it more this year. However, in order to break through any blocks, you encounter at work, you will have to speak up and ask for what you want, rather than waiting for someone to notice you're unhappy. Surround yourself with blue, as it carries the power to increase self-knowledge and improve your ability to express yourself more authentically. Your most intimate relationship can help you to discover more about yourself this year, as you're encouraged to share on a deeper and more trusting level.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You would be highly ambitious and work hard to fulfill desired professional goals. The key to success is adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards work and commitments. This period brings excellent opportunities for people in showbusiness, beauty, culture and related fields. Your ability to express yourself and to solve problems is enhanced. Professionally there will be huge expenses as well as financial gains from foreign business associates. Family members would be supportive. Your finances could also improve as long as you employ a new strategy. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health and fitness needs.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) The planetary configuration is such that it brings desire for love, harmony and peace in your life. Personal and professional relations are loving, stable, and harmonious. You may lose your fear of taking risks and this brings success in competitive exams and interviews. This would be a good week for financial undertakings involving electronics, technology, arts as well as group activities. Learning new things is your passion. You are more sensitive artistically, your imagination is stirred, and you have an increased appreciation for subtleties. You are thinking more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. There may be a minor health problem and you need to give more attention to your health.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your courage and confidence will keep you hopes alive. You can attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and connect with unapproachable people at work. Increased energy along with a renewed feeling of confidence favors you. Make the best of time and utilize your energy accordingly. Problems in your life may be overcome by bravery, self-assertion, and directness. There's nothing wrong with a bit of self-centeredness. You are highly motivated to make money and this enhances your energy for new money-making projects. Romantic matters, as well as pleasure-seeking activities, come to the fore this week. You might spend a lot of time in making short frequent trips, visiting friends and relatives.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) There is good luck attending to material matters, as there is increase of wealth and monetary gains. This is the right time to share your loving and personal relationships and share thoughts and ideas and spend good time in the association of your loved one. Practical details are to be dealt with clarity and efficiency. You may be involved in meetings with business associates as financial and business dealings would bring good results and gains. You can count on your professional and personal partners, as they stand by you through thick and thin. You will work in free and unrestricted space. Physical energy and good health allow you to tackle busy schedules.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You achieve success as you are outstanding in your work. Attend to professional, personal and material aspects during this time. You interact with people in position of power and authority gracefully and diplomatically. You think in an unorthodox way and this brings appreciation from seniors and peers alike. You take on a dreamy and philosophical outlook, which opens up your heart to new experiences. Strong existing relationships are likely to grow and transform this week. Your finances could also improve by continuous efforts and follow up. In love and romance your personal relationship takes on a special quality as you communicate beautifully. Health needs care and old habits of excesses need to be kicked.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) Self-confidence and quick action are highlighted. A strong positive feeling towards your beloved encourages you to do something new that is unusual and would be a wonderful surprise. Your personal charm and charisma take you through complicated situations. You tend to instinctively know the right course of action to take in most situations. This stands you in good stead when you are faced with opposition. This is a good time for teachers and those in manufacturing and finance industries. People in marketing and sales will have to work hard to meet professional commitments.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Your domestic and career needs are fulfilled. New ideas and concepts floated by you at your work place will be appreciated. You find an intoxicating romance and express your feelings to your loved one. At work, you may take up new assignments and projects that would bring creativity and innovation. Your inner hopes and desires come to the forefront even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical-purpose of mind. There may be gains from property, ancestral land, shares and assets in hand. Spending time in solitude among natural surroundings is therapeutic.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are unusually introspective and reserved. It is a good time to organize your workplace and make it well equipped with the latest infrastructure. This would help you to get better efficiencies to achieve desired goals. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you. Your communications and presentation style brings accolades from people who matter. Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. You are just fair and generous in family and professional situations. Health needs to be looked at also be careful in your interpersonal dealings and avoid confrontations.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You work hard to handle business ventures and collaborations. You may take up assignments and projects but would require extra effort and networking to take them through. Your efforts to reach out to new people will be accepted but with reservation however you meet with success in foreign matters. On the finance front expenditure will be on the rise. You would be able to make an impact on business associates with hard work and creative ideas. Your creativity will assist in your output at work and help you gain recognition. You extend your hospitality to family.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You are practical, hard-working and helpful in personal and professional matters this week. You would find it easier to express your unique individuality, even if this involves changing careers or jobs. Time is well spent on your hobby that reflects your unique personality. You are more willing to adapt to new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. You are able to find creative solutions to problems now. Health remains good as you are filled with a positive energy.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Responsibilities and workload are on the increase and the key to success is in adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards life. This week proves to be good for persons in finance, shares, law and management. Your ability to express yourself and to solve problems is enhanced. Students in creative fields and the performing arts will get success and good results. In money matters there are outflows as well as financial gains. There is active support from family members and business associates. If you've been off track on your exercise routine be kind to yourself, but make sure you re-commit to your personal goals.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) The desire for love, harmony and peaceful life will come to fore. You are powerful, transformative and energetic. You make a mark at your place of work and gain recognition from associates. This period brings for you socializing, romance and stability at work place. Love, friendship and relationship are emphasized. Students will need to work hard and put in the extra effort for forthcoming exams. You would make best use of your knowledge and skills but wisdom would influence more to the knowledge. You are likely to take your hobbies and talents more seriously. In fact, this is an excellent time for materializing a personal hobby, turning it into a business.

Why do some planets have moons?

On Earth, you can look up at night and see the Moon shining bright from hundreds of thousands of miles away. But if you went to Venus, that wouldn't be the case.

Not every planet has a moon - so why do some planets have several moons, while others have none? First, a moon is called a natural satellite. Astronomers refer to satellites as objects in space that orbit larger bodies. Since a moon isn't human-made, it's a natural satellite.

Currently, there are two main theories for why some planets have moons. Moons are either gravitationally captured if they are within what's called a planet's Hill sphere radius, or they're formed along with a solar system.

The Hill sphere radius

Objects exert a gravitational force of attraction on other nearby objects. The larger the object is, the greater the force of attraction.

This gravitational force is the reason we all stay grounded to Earth instead of floating away.

The solar system is dominated by the Sun's large gravitational force, which keeps all of the planets in orbit. The Sun is the most massive object in our solar system, which means it has the most gravitational influence on objects such as planets.

In order for a satellite to orbit a planet, it has to be close enough for the planet to exert enough force to keep it in orbit. The minimum distance for a planet to keep a satellite in orbit is called the Hill sphere radius.

The Hill sphere radius is based on the mass of both the larger object and the smaller object.

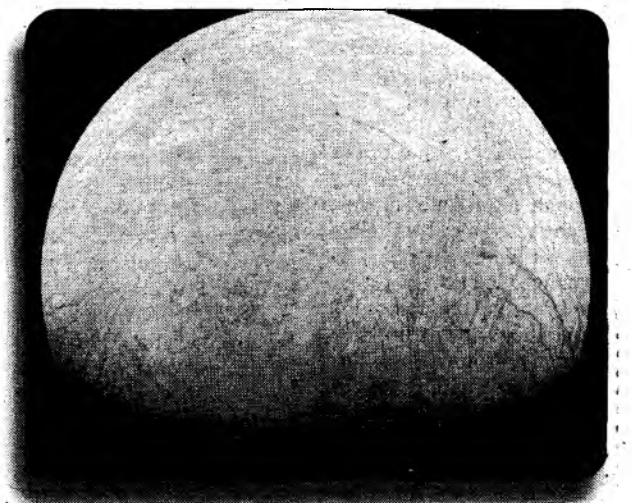
The Moon orbiting Earth is a good example of how the Hill sphere radius works. The Earth orbits around the Sun, but the Moon is close enough to Earth that Earth's gravitational pull captures it. The moon orbits around the Earth, rather than the Sun, because it is within Earth's Hill sphere radius.

Small planets like Mercury and Venus have a tiny Hill sphere radius, since they can't exert a large gravitational pull. Any potential moons would likely get pulled in by the Sun instead.

Many scientists are still looking to see whether these planets may have had small moons in the past. Back during the formation of the solar system, they may have had moons that got knocked away by collisions with other space objects.

Mars has two moons, Phobos and Deimos. Scientists still debate whether these came from asteroids that passed close into Mars' Hill sphere radius and got captured by the planet, or if they were formed at the same time as the solar system. More evidence supports the first theory, because Mars is close to the asteroid belt.

Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune have larger Hill sphere radii, because they are much larger than Earth, Mars, Mercury and Venus and they're farther from the Sun. Their gravitational pulls can attract and keep more natural satellites such as moons in orbit. For example,



This image provided by NASA, processed by Kevin M Gill, shows Jupiter's moon Europa captured by the Juno spacecraft on September 29, 2022, with north to the left. Research published on March 4, 2024, suggests there's less oxygen on the icy surface of Jupiter's moon Europa than thought - and that could affect what if any life might be lurking in the moon's underground ocean. (AP)

Jupiter has 95 moons, while Saturn has 146.

Moons forming with a solar system

Another theory suggests that some moons formed at the same time as their solar system.

Solar systems start out with a big disk of gas rotating around a sun. As the gas rotates around the sun, it condenses into planets and moons that rotate around them. The planets and moons then all rotate in the same direction.

But only a few moons in our solar system were likely created this way.

Scientists predict that Jupiter's and Saturn's inner moons formed during the emergence of our solar system because they're so old. The rest of the moons in our solar system, including Jupiter's and Saturn's outer moons, were probably gravitationally captured by their planets.

Earth's Moon is special because it likely formed in a different way. Scientists believe that long ago, a large, Mars-sized object collided with the Earth. During that collision, a big chunk flew off the Earth and into its orbit and became the Moon.

Scientists guess that the Moon formed this way because they've found a type of rock called basalt in soil on the Moon's surface. The Moon's basalt looks the same as basalt found inside the Earth.

Ultimately, the question of why some planets have moons is still widely debated, but factors such as a planet's size, gravitational pull, Hill sphere radius and how its solar system formed may play a role. *(The Conversation)*