

*Life is like one big Mardi Gras. But instead of showing your boobs, show people your brain, and if they like what they'll, you'll have more beads than you know what to do with.*

--- Ellen DeGeneres

## The Shillong Times

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### Modified Ministry

The portfolio allocations after the swearing-in of the Modi 2.0 ministry saw two top portfolios going into strong hands – home to Amit Shah and defence to Rajnath Singh who acquitted himself well as home minister in the previous government. Former foreign secretary S Jaishankar knows his subject well and hence fits in well as external affairs minister. Notably, Prime Minister Modi, riding the crest of a popular support, has chosen to retain most of the ministers from his first term. He is a pro-establishment figure and not given to acts of disruptions. Both styles have their strengths. Continuity meant treading a familiar path, wherein pitfalls are more easily identified, clarity is a given, and a safe course ensured. On the debit side, chances of a minister developing vested interests in the course of a long innings are there too. Arun Jaitley was a tower of strength to the Prime Minister in his first term. He did a job, stood by the side of the PM through thick and thin, and advised the government in matters of legal frameworks when faced with tricky situations. Health is a serious problem to him, and it must first be attended to. His absence will be felt not only by the PM but by others too.

Sushma Swaraj, also faced with some health problems, will be missed by all. She managed the external affairs ministry with considerable PR skills though the PM was by her side to take matters forward. As for Maneka Gandhi, who missed the bus this time, something else might be in store. Amit Shah is bound to rock the ministry in positive ways. Rajnath Singh as PM's second-in-command would be a reassuring presence. Nitin Gadkari, despite some disquiet, is back, but General VK Singh seems to have been demoted and will serve under Gadkari. Uma Bharti has volunteered to step aside. Most senior ministers, as also juniors, found themselves in the reckoning. The team spirit they displayed during Modi's first innings would be to the PM's great advantage again. The new Modi team has space for only one berth for each BJP ally. This might be a conscious attempt to reduce importance of regional leaders and their turfs. Many of them have a tag of corruption. Bihar's Nitish Kumar has registered dissent and kept his JDU out of the new ministry. It is worth watching how the Shiv Sena starts roaring again. More inductions are likely as team Modi moves forward.

# Agroecology and Indigenous Farmers of Meghalaya

By Deadiakami Mohrmen, Coriniki Slong and Bhogtoram Mawroh

Like for many parts of the country Meghalaya's economy is still highly dependent on agriculture. The primary sector (which includes agriculture and other natural resources extraction activities) contributes around 30% of the state's GDP i.e., Rs.8,168 crore out of the Rs. 27,228 crore economy. With over half of the population still connected to agriculture the state cannot expect to achieve sustainable economic growth by neglecting people who are working in this sector, i.e., the farmers. But when it comes to enjoying the share of the economic pie theirs is the smallest share. Average annual income of farmers in India is just over Rs 37,000 or only Rs 3000 per month. The same is the case with Meghalaya (see discussion below). This means that in spite of farmers making huge contributions to the state's economy they are mostly ignored. Who are these farmers who form the backbone of the state's economy? What is their story? This article will tell the story of an indigenous farmer who epitomises the struggles of other farmers in the state. In spite of the immense difficulties they face consistently, these farmers have the common good as their raison d'être.

Phron Kassar is a 51 year old farmer from Shkenpyrsit village which falls under Amlarem C & RD Block, West Jaintia Hills. Her mother was (L) Shida Kassar who arrived from Umladkhar village to Shkenpyrsit in search of livelihood. Phron studied only till Class III at the Shkenpyrsit LP school, unable to continue because of financial difficulties. By the time she was 12 years old she started helping her mother in the farm. In time, like her mother (who was also a cow trader) she managed to own 10 cows. But 13 years ago she sold them for Rs 45,000 to educate her children, determined not to allow her fate to befall her children.

Presently Phron Kassar cultivates a variety of crops, viz., ginger, pumpkin, garlic, beans, mustard, peas, rice, radish, potato, sweet potato, cauliflower, cabbage, spinach, carrot, cucumber, coriander, etc. In her garden she also has local fruit trees like sohiong, salangi and peach. She also keeps poultry, piggery and practises apiculture (bee keeping). According to her, the average annual earnings from her farm comes to Rs.20,000 to 25,000 from vegetables, Rs 8000-9000 from piggery, Rs 4000-5000 from poultry rearing. Curiously, when the upper range is combined it gives total annual earnings of Rs 39,000 which when

divided by twelve months give a monthly income of Rs 3250 or Rs. 110 per day, similar to the national average. What needs to be borne in mind is that this is lower than the prescribed minimum daily wage of a highly skilled worker in agriculture in Meghalaya which is Rs. 420.

For a time, in order to boost her income Phron Kassar used chemical fertilizers like DAP for increased production. One day the chemical spilled on her leg and the skin started itching. Struck by this she was horrified by the thought of how the chemicals might be affecting the crops, soil and the people. Appalled by the realisation she vowed to never use any more chemicals in her farm and practise only organic farming. Concern for common good was more important for her than personal gains. Currently, she and many other farmers from Jaintia Hills are working with SURE (Society for Urban and Rural Empowerment) and NESFAS (North East Society for Agro-biodiversity and Slow Food) on adoption of agro-ecological methods for food production.

The 2018 IPES (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems) Food, publication, "Breaking away from industrial food and farming systems" states that Agro-ecology is an umbrella term for various alternatives to industrial agriculture viz., organic, bio-dynamic, permaculture, alternative, sustainable, regenerative, community supported agriculture (CSA), cooperative food system initiatives, or urban food transitions. A growing archive of case studies from around the world demonstrates that Agro-ecology is providing immense benefits (economic, social and food security) while ensuring climate justice and restoring soils and the environment. In April 2018, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) also underlined the potential of Agro-ecology to underpin sustainable food system transitions at the 2nd FAO International Symposium on Agro-ecology: Scaling up Agro-ecology to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Coming back to Phron Kassar, she explained that when she started engaging in organic farming she used eit masi (cow dung), eit sniang (pig waste), eit syiar (chicken waste) and skum kba (rice husk) for making compost. A pit would be dug on the ground and filled with animal wastes.

Later skum kba and ashes are added and left to decompose. When the compost is ready it is dug up and applied to the plot. In the past SURE had also assisted her with trainings on composting.

Furthermore, determined not to use any chemicals, Phron Kassar invented her own organic pesticide by using a local plant called chyrmit kyndeh (Acmella alba also commonly known as toothache plant). She grinds the plant and mixes it with water. This concoction is then sprayed on the cabbages. According to her, it is best to apply before the leaves begin to fold and it has been very effective in preventing pest attacks on the crop. Phron Kassar informed that the vegetables grown without using chemical fertilizers and pesticides are not only very tasty but also keep the soil healthy.

Kassar got the idea of using the plant as a pesticide by noticing that the local community has been using the plant as a traditional cure for toothache since time immemorial. Acmella Alba actually has local anaesthetic properties. She surmised that since it already has medicinal properties, it must also have pest repellent properties. It should be mentioned that Phron Kassar is also a traditional healer. She is proficient in traditional massage therapy using mustard oil to cure people's ailments and has revealed that she also is experimenting with the bio-pesticide on other crops as well to gauge its effectiveness.

Change in production practises from dependence on external inputs to agro-ecological methods which consisted of adopting biological pest and disease-management solutions including predators, insect pathogens and disease antagonists, plants with insecticidal, fungicidal, bactericidal and herbicidal qualities (practised by Phron Kassar), and parasitic nematodes was one of the main outcomes of the transition in the seven case studies, viz., USA, Nicaragua and Mexico, Tanzania, France, China, Spain and Cuba, reported in "Breaking away from industrial food and farming systems". To achieve change in production practises NESFAS and SURE are promoting Agro-ecology Learning Circles (ALC). These are farmer groups aimed at empowering local communities to recognize, revive, practice, and eventually further develop traditional agro-ecology practices and stimulate local innovations for sustainable local food

systems. Six participatory researches developed and implemented by farmers on pest management and soil improvement across six different locations are currently in progress. In total 38 farmers, 28 female and 10 male from the Khasi and Garo indigenous communities are taking part in the experiments.

Phron Kassar gave an interesting insight of how during elections ginger is in great demand. She therefore decided to plant more of it in the following year. The seeds are those that she got from her grandmother. She is determined to adhere to the principles of Agro-ecology which are not only about food security but achieving food sovereignty as well. "Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" - La Via Campesina.

Phron Kassar sells her produce in the local market of Shkentalang. Sometimes, customers visit the village to buy produce directly as well. In the past farmers from Shkenpyrsit grew only for self-consumption. Now production for the market is increasing. To supplement her income Phron has been working as a mid day meal cook at Dongwah SSA School Shkenpyrsit since 2006. She was one of the first people from the village to be appointed as a cook. Initially she was paid a paltry sum of Rs.150 per day; now she gets Rs. 1000 per month.

Farmers like Phron Kassar's contribution to the local as well state economy cannot be understated. Without improving their lot the resulting economic model of the state will be one of instability and high inequality. Instead Agro-ecology provides a framework for a transition towards sustainable food and farming systems. Only when indigenous farmers like Phron Kassar are supported will a truly prosperous, sustainable, fair and healthy society will be created.

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## Modi's NDA-II Will it heed to sulking partners?

By Insaq

### ROUND THE STATES

Notwithstanding the grand oath-taking ceremony in the forecourt of Rashtrapati Bhavan, the NDA may already have teething problems in round two, where none were expected. With the BJP having got a majority on its own, there was fear that the regional allies importance would wane further. Remember, murmurings of not being consulted even at the time of NDA-1. For starters the JD(U) in Bihar has already thrown a googy as it is sulking with the offer of only one Cabinet berth for it. Chief Nitish Kumar chose not to mince his words and refused categorically to join the Modi-led Ministry. He said: "we don't want a token participation." With 16 MPs the JD(U) is the third largest party in the NDA in this Lok Sabha. And so was eyeing at least two Cabinet and one Minister of State berths. So as of now it's a no-go between the partners. Besides, Apna dal, from Uttar Pradesh has been kept out of this time from the government but so far it is not heard complaining, as the State has got 9 berths. How Modi and Amit overcome the Bihari problem is anybody's guess. However, they can well argue that 20 of the 29 States are represented and that even its Shiv Sena partner from Maharashtra, which is in second number in the tally of seats in the lower House has got just one Cabinet berth. Importantly, Modi has not given a single berth to the three southern States of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra. And why would he, as the BJP got a harsh beating there.

The NDA-II is being described as "a blend of energy and experience", let us keep our fingers crossed that the two are not wasted on squabbling within.

#### 3 CMs Take Oath

The leadership of three States—Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh took its oath too to work for and fulfill aspirations of their people. While for 72-year-old Naveen Patnaik it is the 5th consecutive term overcoming a Modi wave with a decisive victory, 46-year-old Jagan Mohan Reddy will start a new innings after a long wait of 10 years, and for Pema Khandu it is a more comfortable start since the BJP will install the government on its own having won 41 of 60 Assembly seats. He was CM since July 2016, but as is normal in the North-east there were twists and turns.

Importantly, this time round all the three Chief Ministers shunned the Raj Bhavan's for their oath taking ceremony and instead did so at convention centres/stadium among the aam janata, which is a growing 'populist' trend. And, while they had counterparts from other States in attendance at the solemn occasion, where the team of Cabinet and MoS were also inducted, what stood out Chandrababu's absence, as he turned down Jagan's invite! It goes without saying while it will be easy for Khandu with BJP at the Centre the same cannot be said for Naveen and Jagan. Both require special attention of the Centre's given the recent Fani cyclone in Odisha and long pending demand for Special Status in Andhra. The latter it is learnt is non-negotiable. Jagan is said to have turned down 2 Cabinet berths offered by Modi on his visit to Delhi. Developments are worth a close watch.

**Karnataka, WB On Edge**  
Karnataka and West Bengal are on tenterhooks. The Lok Sabha results have stumped Chief Ministers Kumaraswamy and Mamata Banerjee respectively,

forcing them to rejig their respective Cabinets. And while the former did it on Saturday last by dropping two ministers and bringing on 8 others from coalition partner Congress, the latter made a major reshuffle on Tuesday last. The situation in Vidhan Souda is more worrisome after the Lok Sabha verdict for the JDS-Congress combine as the BJP has been waiting in the wings to topple the six-month-old government at the earliest opportunity available. Such is the fear that Kumaraswamy dropped a minister, who did not attend the Cabinet meeting and replaced him with his brother! The ruling combine is making all efforts to keep its flock together as the nagging fear that some of its MLAs may cross over is not just a hallucination.

Likewise, not just the drubbing in the Lok Sabha polls, but that her flock is deserting her (3 MLAs and 50 councillors so far who have crossed over to the BJP), Mamata is worried for the future – the 2021 Assembly elections. However, it chooses to dismiss the developments and put up a brave face. Its leaders proclaim that one or two MLAs joining the BJP will not impact it. "State elections will prove whether the people are with us or not," and insist that "people are with Didi and they will continue to remain irrespective of the fact that some leaders are switching sides." This only time will tell, as the BJP has made major inroads into her bastion and she would need a miracle to retain her hold. At the same time, Didi showed signs of her annoyance by doing a flip-flop for Modi's swearing-in. First she accepted the invite and later, just hours after the BJP invited the families of 54 party workers allegedly killed in political violence across the State, Mamata said she won't go. Instead she decided to visit North 24 Parganas to protest against attacks on TMC cadres by the BJP after the polls! She went a step further and in a message to Modi said the swearing-in ceremony was an "august occasion to celebrate democracy" and not one that should be "devalued" by any political party which uses it as an opportunity to score political points." Indeed, let's be prepared to see a lot more of it.

**Mizo Goes 'Dry'**  
Is controlled sale of liquor better than a complete ban? Mizoram perhaps has an answer as it opts for the latter. On Tuesday last, the Mizo National Front government decided it was time to act to turn the State 'dry', after four years of controlled sale of liquor. The Assembly had in fact passed the Mizoram Liquor (Prohibition) Bill 2019 on March 20, but it couldn't be implemented as the model code of conduct was already in place for General elections. Also, the High Court had granted time to liquor sellers till May 27 to dispose of existing stock. Apparently, the government is not only fulfilling its poll promise made last year but hopes that alcohol-related deaths would not continue to rise since 2015, when prohibition was lifted. As per the State Excise and Narcotics dept 9 such deaths happened in 2015, with the number going up to 22 in 2016 and to 59 in 2017. Figures are unavailable for 2018. Former Chief Minister, Lal Thanhawla, who was instrumental in introducing regulated sale of liquor in 2015 has his doubts whether the ban will help "as prohibition has never been successful anywhere in the world." Will he be proved wrong eventually? ---INFA

### TO THE EDITOR

#### Post-mortem on EVMs

Editor,  
On reading this headline readers would ask, "Why restore an old car?" I have great responsibility as a citizen to point out a few things to enlighten those members of the public who enjoy the breakthrough in electronics engineering but do not want to ask how things actually work in the long run. The EVM is not a smart phone, it is not your digibox for satellite link, it is not your scientific calculator, and it is not even a trader's calculator. It is too easy a circuit that I am at my wits end as to what to compare it to. The CEC has given the excuse about paper jamming. In 2014 it was found that humidity of a place might have been the cause for paper jamming. Then why not rectify the fault? Forget GPS, forget weather forecast software, if a mango trader selling mangoes at Rs 51 per kg for what he bought at Rs 34 per kg, then with a movement of his finger he

would smile when his cheap calculator (Orpat say) shows 50 percent gain. If it shows 50% loss he cannot file a case against Orpat the company but just throw away the machine. The only discrepancy of the calculator is the buy one mango and get one free mango. It's like loading your truck with fourteen tons and getting fourteen tons free as used to be done in the 80's. I consulted leading economists and Arithmetic teachers of class X but none of them could understand this logic. I believe it is in the DNA of business to defy Balakot like tsunami and all laws of diminishing returns, or I.C. curves (indifference curve). Jobs or no jobs, no difference. Economic slowdown or flow high no difference; RBI regulations or not it makes no difference; CBI cleansed or not it makes no difference. Assuming we commit mistakes in soldering or linking fuses, then some questions to answer would be (1) Why confuse

challenge votes with deviant behaviour? (2) When EVM was to be introduced, why did we forget to create rules or laws to deal with deviant behaviour? (3) Which elector would be foolish enough to depend on a machine as a judge and challenge it at the risk of having to pay Rs 10,000 as fine and six months imprisonment? (4) SC has categorically ordered that EC should respond to the three complainants against EVMs. What have they done? If yes, were the findings made public? (5) What is the use of EC finding anything when 23rd May has come and gone and a new Government is already in place? (6) In future will the EC pronounce that any elector, say in Leh, Ladakh who has a complaint should bring Rs 10,000 and a blanket? We should accept our limitations. Before ASAT test there was a failed attempt to shoot Micro SAT R on February 12 this year. No man is free from failures.

The ballot paper is the best bet.

Yours etc.,  
M.Khyriem  
Via email.

#### Humanity above all else

Editor,  
The news item, "Hindu, Muslim couples undergo kidney swap in Punjab" (ST, May 30 2019), immediately gave me a sense of gladness. At the end of the day we are all human beings of flesh and blood. We are all creations of the One above. We may be defined by our birth, our religion, our race, our community but the colour of our blood that runs in each one of us is the same. The numerous faiths and religions that we are born into or a faith that we believe in are but different routes that will lead us to only one destination. While no religion, no faith will teach us the wrong tenets can we not be more Godly in our actions here

on earth? To love one another and treat one another with love and respect is the greatest religion that humankind must follow. We don't need wars, we don't need violence, and we don't need enmity! All that we need is love, adoration and reverence for one another. When we love one another we love God!

Yours etc.,  
Jennifer Dkhar,  
Via email

#### Modi starts on a sour note

Editor,  
The new Modi ministry began its second term journey with a bumpy start. One of the alliance partners of the NDA, namely the Janata Dal (United) led by Nitish Kumar is sulking and has decided to opt out of the Cabinet. The JD (U) was offered one ministerial berth but the party turned it down saying it is not interested in having a symbolic presence in the

new government. Nitish Kumar has stated that it is not necessary to be in the Cabinet but that the JD (U) will continue to be in the NDA and the alliance is united. The party had demanded three berths in the central Cabinet but Modi was prepared to give only one berth, which made the JD (U) take a decision to opt out of the Cabinet. Thus, a shaky start for the ministry on the first day itself does not augur well for the Government, though there is nothing for Modi to fear. But this distasteful experience on the first day has given a chance to the Opposition to cast aspersions on Modi's government. At the same time, this incident is expected to peter out without gaining much traction.

Yours etc.,  
TK Nandanam,  
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.