

MESSAGE FOR TODAY
Dine on little, and sup on less.
— CERVANTES

The Assam Tribune

Power tariff

The Assam Electricity Regulatory Council has approved a 13-paise hike in power tariff following a public hearing on the proposal of the Assam State Electricity Board and its successor companies. This has evoked widespread public protest and not without justification. The State's power scenario continues to be in perennial doldrums notwithstanding assertions made by the Government to the contrary. Already into several years of the much-talked-about power reform, the visibility of its impact at the ground can at best be described as blurred. The meagre power generation apart, transmission and distribution continue to be plagued by a plethora of ills. And much of this stems from the inept and unprofessional management of a vital sector like power. The annual losses suffered by the ASEB and its successor companies continue to mount – from 0.67 per cent in 2006-07 to 1.59 per cent in 2008-09. Even small things like metering and billing continue to be widely anomalous, adding to the woes of the harrowed consumers. Another malpractice left unaddressed is the supply of power to so-called VIPs at highly subsidized rates or even free of cost. Such uncalled-for generosity at a time when the power sector is hitting an abyss needs to be stopped forthwith.

It is apparent that the ASEB and its successor entities are grappling with ills that are very much of their own making. Logic, therefore, dictates that it cannot pass on the burden of its loss to the common consumers by way of a hike in tariff. Before effecting any hike, the ASEB has to ensure that the people get uninterrupted and quality power – none of which has been happening for quite some time. Wrong planning, poor implementation, and a regrettably low level of professionalism continue to haunt the State's power sector. The glaring lapses in the functioning of the ASEB and the Power Department as a whole need to be rectified at the earliest. Along with generation of more power, streamlining the transmission and distribution network is a must. One can legitimately ask what is being done to prevent unabated power theft which accounts for a large share of the T&D loss. Any professional organization ought to remember that prices have to be commensurate with the quality of service, and despite the highly deficient services of the ASEB, power tariff in the State is among the highest in the country. It is time the ASEB and its successor companies functioned in a competitive, responsible and accountable manner.

Human trade

The United State's action in placing India in Tier 2 Watch List on human trafficking for the seventh consecutive year once again brings to the fore this deep rooted problem. Though human trafficking is a global phenomenon, it is very acute in the North Eastern region of the country. It is quite disconcerting that the annual Trafficking in Persons Report 2010 released by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton revealed that girls from the North Eastern region including the educated are duped with promise of well-paid employment in the large cities and then forced into prostitution or marriages in Haryana and Punjab. Taking advantage of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment well organized groups are luring away women and minors outside the region. Most of such victims of human trafficking are sold off in the red light areas of Mumbai, Delhi, Siliguri. Human trafficking in the North East have reached an alarming proportion.

The US report also slammed the weak implementation of policies and corrupt officials for failure to effectively confront the scourge. It revealed the involvement of a section of corrupt officials facilitating in human trafficking and providing protection to those who are carrying out this nefarious activities. The report had pointed out that the Indian Government has not demonstrated sufficient progress in its law enforcement efforts to tackle prevalent bonded labour trafficking. The only positive aspect in the report is that Assam, Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have constituted Anti-Human Trafficking Units. But it is not known how far these units are effective in tackling trafficking. It is high time the law enforcing agencies coordinate their activities to tackle the menace of human trafficking head on. The vulnerable areas should be identified and awareness campaigns be conducted with the help of voluntary agencies. A strong vigil by the village elders, NGOs can go a long way in thwarting the activities of the traffickers. To check this menace the authorities along with voluntary organizations should identify the vulnerable areas and step up vigil to ensure that the agents of human traffickers cannot dupe the gullible people. The authorities should also initiate action to end complicity of law enforcing officials in trafficking. Strong deterrent action must be taken against those engaged in this heinous criminal activity. Rehabilitation schemes should be formulated to put life back in track for the rescued victims of human trafficking. The society must come forward and assist the authorities in tackling this menace.

The Assam Tribune From The past

66 Thousand Square Feet Eroded In Nagakhelia

(From our Correspondent)

Dibrugarh, June 16
Till yesterday 37,000 and 66,000 square feet respectively in Mohonaghat and Nagakhelia were eroded followed by evacuation of eleven families.

The Chief Engineer, Embankment and Drainage Department, Assam, came down from Shillong and visited the sites accompanied by local departmental officials. Yesterday evening I found that one furlong length of ring bund-cum-pathway disappeared at Nagakhelia. I saw several houses being dismantled near the bank. Local officials are arranging to construct a new timber spur between Mohonaghat and George Institution out of funds available for annual repairs of the spurs.

SUNDAY, JUNE 17, 1962

A Parliament for the North East

Mirza Zulfikar Rahman & Jabin T Jacob

ters into talks with such groups, which however, do not get very far or produce only limited results in the form of autonomous councils for example, which then become mirror images of the state burocracies, defeating their very purpose of community representative decision-making and policy input. Autonomous councils are instead, often seen as involved in corruption and easily sidelined by state governments in case of a mismatch in policy goals. This leads to a new cycle of violence.

The central government has viewed the situation in North-east India as one of managing the insurgency situation and of pumping resources for development purposes. It has however, failed in the process of addressing the underlying problems facing various ethnic communities of the region, the associated lack of state-community trust and growing inter-community divides which were the triggers of insurgencies in the first place. To ensure peace and stability in North-east India, there is a need for much more than a security mindset or the going through the motions of electoral democracy. The Indian

Constitution is a living document that must be used more creatively to deal with the specific problems of the North-east.

To counter the role of the central government as a manipulator of intra-North-east Indian politics in order to serve supposedly 'national' interests, ensure that minorities including women are not marginalised, escape institutional inertia and help the people of the region to deal with the increasing effects of globalisation, both positive and negative, North-east India requires a regional parliament that will function within the ambit of the Indian Constitution but will aim to give the region a weight that is more than the sum of its parts.

One such solution could be the formation of a North-East Parliament (NEP) where every ethnic community, small or big, would be represented proportionally across the state boundaries of North-east India and perhaps include also the hill regions of West Bengal. The proposed NEP would help ethnic communities to make their voices heard in a recognized demo-

cratic platform and allow for the formation of cross-state coalitions (much like what happens in the European Parliament) over inter-state and regional issues such as water, environment protection and infrastructure development among others. More importantly, with adequate powers of legislation and oversight of regional and central government institutions, the NEP would provide a forum where communities have the opportunity to talk and hold the central and state governments to account before they have to pick up the gun.

The politics of majoritarian democracy only reinforces the lower relative weight possessed by the north-eastern provinces in the national decision-making process. In democratic and federal India, a big part of the cause for North-east India's backwardness has to do with the fact the region with its small population sends very few representatives to the federal Parliament.

Out of the 545 members of the lower house (Lok Sabha) of the Indian federal Parliament, only 25 come from the eight provinces of the North-east and only 15 out of the 238 seats are available to them in the upper house (Rajya Sabha). In this sense, the whole of the North-east has an insignificant voice in political decision-making in India. The NEP will strengthen the hands of Members of Parliament from North-east India by providing them greater weight at the national level and deepening their common

identity and developing a culture of common action for common interests.

We argue that no citizen should be denied 'political representation' on grounds only of 'numerical inferiority' of their religion, race, caste, language or any of them and that ethnic groups in North-east India also receive affirmative action with deeper political significance rather than the mere delimiting of parliamentary constituencies on the basis of a national population scale, which under present and foreseeable conditions is likely to perpetuate the 'permanent minority' status of ethnic communities from the North-east in the national scheme of things. These communities should also be treated as 'classes' and as 'politically-backward classes' at that, deserving not better employment prospects but better prospects of political representation.

Such a universal recognition of proportional representation of all communities in North-east India will lead to a decrease in demands for autonomous councils that have proliferated without really resolving local grievances. If the central government can have special laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) to combat insurgency in the region for over 50 long years now, it could just as well create a special legislature with adequate powers and that gives the initiative to communities to address problems that have remained unresolved for over 60 years.

Bhopal gas verdict

Rhiddhis Chakravorty

The farcical verdict on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy has once again exposed more than one dirty truth about the Indian state beyond doubt; that the judiciary, just like the executive is buried deep down in alleged corruption; that the rich and powerful are above law; that Indian polity and diplomacy are mere puppets attached to American and other strings and that the lives of ordinary Indian citizens have no value. Though several ministers have come up with statements expressing dissatisfaction over the verdict and the Prime Minister has formed a GoM following public outcry, the seriousness of the government is a matter of suspicion. New Delhi's dubious role in Warren Anderson's absconding is well known and now well established.

There has been numerous other instances of the rich and powerful showing utter disdain to the basic human rights of the common Indian man. But the entire saga of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy and the quantum of punishment to the guilty is the latest and dirtiest example. The shocking verdict has compelled the civil society to wonder 'What next?'

Questions are already being raised regarding the civilian nuclear liability bill and the provisions to shield big corporate houses involved in case of a nuclear disaster. New Delhi's assurance that adequate provisions will be there in the Civilian Nuclear Liability Bill to prevent any accident in the future is hard to digest going

by its track record. Don't we remember how all information about the nuclear safeguard agreement between India and the IAEA were undemocratically hidden from the people by the government on flimsy grounds? The ridiculous argument that any strict action against multinationals would scare away foreign investment and therefore there should be no criminal action against officers of MNCs even in case of a nuclear disaster is a threat to our sovereignty itself. The way Warren Anderson, the then chairman of Union Carbide Corporation was shielded from any inquiry and later allowed to abscond by the Indian government poses disturbing questions like what role will New Delhi play in case of a Nuclear Disaster. If the Congress protected Anderson and other accused, the BJP led NDA conferred the Padma Bhushan on another accused Keshub Mahindra, the former chairman of Union Carbide India. Applying the same yardstick a similar VIP treatment to those responsible for a possible nuclear disaster cannot be ruled out. The emerging scenario only drives home the point that the lives of millions of powerless, tax paying Indians are, after all, less important than the interests of foreign investors.

What makes the scenario bleaker is that we can no longer believe that we can turn

to the judiciary if the executive fails us. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy verdict has broken the faith once and for all. The biggest ever corporate crime in the country was treated like a case of pickpocketing. The judiciary betrayed the people not on one but several counts. First it took 26 years to pronounce a verdict. Secondly it got the charges converted from culpable homicide into the lesser crime of causing death by negligence. And when the verdict came it was an insult to the entire nation. It was the biggest joke in the history of the Indian judiciary. As if that was not enough, the accused were granted bail. It is doubtful if they will ever go to jail.

Now New Delhi is talking of reopening the case, bringing Anderson back to India and punishing the guilty – things which it did not do for 26 years. The farce perpetrated on the people in the guise of justice only projects a feeling that from the very beginning the Government of India and the supreme court were bent upon denying justice to the victims and it practically left no stone unturned to protect the guilty. With the Congress in power for greater part of the time and BJP too having its fingers in the pie it may be foolish to expect much from New Delhi in case of a nuclear disaster as well.

With such a dubious past be-

hind and a shoddy Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Bill 2010 in the pipeline the danger of a nuclear disaster looms large. Now that we have already sent a very negative message worldwide that anyone can set up killer industries in India, jeopardize the lives and properties of its citizens and can escape prosecution, this danger assumes demonic proportions.

In view of the threatening scenario that is beginning to unfold, the civil society, the media and rights groups have an arduous task ahead. The task of creating pressure on the state to uphold justice as well as of creating mass awareness about the impending danger. A nuclear disaster is likely to cause havoc of much greater magnitude than the Bhopal gas tragedy.

The indifference of the establishment towards the sufferings of the common man for years have created several vacuums in the society only to be filled by various radical anti establishment groups. If in the Northeast it is the separatists, in several other places it is the Maoists. As the latter has become a menace, the Bhopal Gas verdict comes as yet another issue to be used to spread the support base of the Maoists among the exploited. Government's apathy is a boon for them. Yet no one in New Delhi seems to care. Those who do not want the democratic set up to be overthrown by a communist regime should make the government understand the bitter reality.

Comic relief

the skies and takes charge of the situation. He escorts milk delivery vans to their booths. He hops into an autorickshaw and drives like mad to the railway station to rescue stranded passengers. He breaks down the shutters of closed shops and distributes essential commodities to the people. His mission accomplished, *Superman* takes of with grateful people looking heavenward and crying out "Bravo, *Superman*!"

Theme no. 2: A prominent Indian politician emotionally vows in parliament that he will retire from public life, retreat into the jungle and take 'san-

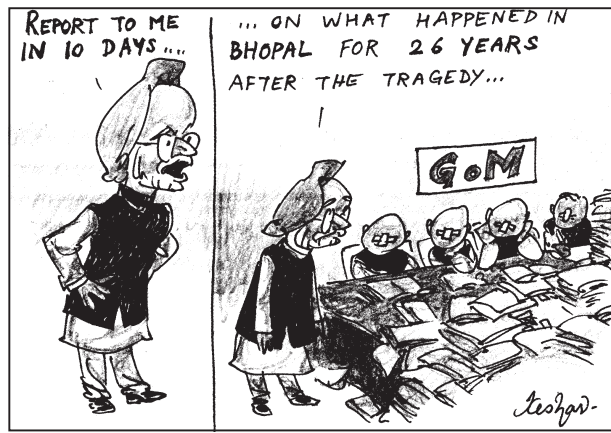
yas' if corruption charges levelled against him are proved true. Eventually, the charges are proved to the hilt and incredible enough, he keeps to his word and retreats into a primeval jungle where he meets Tarzan and the two go thru' many exciting adventures.

Theme no. 3: The nation's capilp is rocked by a sensational robbery in which Rs 70 lacs are abstracted from the strong room of a nationalised bank on the basis of an anonymous telephone call purporting to be from the household of the country's highest political officer. An urgent call goes out to Roy

Rogers who gallops after the robbers fighting off desperate attempts to hush up the case. He finally runs them to the ground and after extracting a false confession exonerating the political officer, he rides away into the sunset over the Yamuna river.

Theme no. 4: The country is in a turmoil because the heir apparent is crudely challenged by his ambitious sister-in-law and little nephew. A desperate call goes out to *Lone Ranger* who makes a sudden and dramatic appearance and after knocking a few jaws and smashing a couple of skulls, he restores order and rides away shouting "Hi-Ho (Smuggled) Silver Away!"

Voices of the Week



Courtesy: THE HINDU

"Yes, there is a division within the outfit (ULFA)... Paresh Barua is not keen for talks. But even then we are trying, though we are prepared to go ahead even without him." – **TARUN GO-GOI**, Chief Minister.

"Corruption is rampant in NRHM, PWD, and DRDA and we demand CBI inquiry into the anomalies in these departments too." – **RANJIT DUTTA**, Assam State BJP president.

"It is astonishing that a hike (Power tariff) such as the recent one has taken place precisely at a time that a large number of government offices and establishments have huge unpaid bills running into crores of rupees. That loss is being sought to be compensated by putting the burden on the common consumer." – **AJAY HAZARIKA**, chief coordinator of Consumers' Legal Protection Forum.

"The tea belt has been ignored by the Congress government. We are at the moment targeting the tea tribe- dominated areas, identifying the major problems in the tea garden areas and pushing our membership drive." – **SIBA PROSAHAD BODRA**, president of the Assam BJP's Tea Cell.

"With the improving pass percentage, we should also keep the quality of education in mind. Getting good marks does not complete the education till it is not attached with responsibilities towards the society." – **KANDARPA KUMAR DEKA**, Vice-Chancellor of Dibrugarh University.

"We will go to any extent to get justice for the victims (Bhopal gas tragedy)... This is not an issue of Bhopal or the state. It should act as an example of how to give punishment in such cases." – **SHIVRAJ SINGH CHOUHAN**, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister.

"While the nation is facing innumerable threats to its internal security, government is forcing CBI to work for its political designs. The CBI has become a tool of intimidation... The post-mortem of its working is necessary." – **NITIN GADKARI**, BJP chief.

"The recent phenomenon of paid news, which is assuming alarming proportion as a serious electoral malpractice, has been causing concern to the Commission in the context of conduct of free and fair elections." – **ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA**, in a communication to the state election commissions.

"As an intrinsic part of the long-term vision of relations it desires with India, Pakistan must act effectively against those terrorist groups that seek to nullify and, to destroy the prospects of peace and cooperation between our two countries." – **NIRUPAMA RAO**, Foreign Secretary.

"The hallmark of the one-year of UPA II is not only corruption but also the miseries heaped on the people in the form of ever-increasing prices." – **SHAMEEM FAIZEE**, CPI national council secretary.