

Editorial

Friday, May 11, 2018

Awaiting - a light at the end of the tunnel

Man, having the ability to judge and to arrange for alternatives, have taken the shortest road to development and progress. The unique gift of mental superiority over every living creature on the planet is what enables him to dominate and distinguish himself from every other creature in spite of the frailties and physical shortcomings. We take pride, and rightly so, in the fact that we can, and are still pushing ourselves to overcome the physical and mental restraints and limits. Yet ever so often, there comes a time when the collective conscience of a society seems to stop working, taken over by the wave of opinions and mob behavior.

One such instance is the period running up to elections for choosing our representatives to the government. In fact, at present, the state is witnessing an increasing undeclared war of words with various political bigwigs starting to warm up with insinuations and counter blames for the state of affairs of the society, while highlighting their trumped up ideologies and deceptively believable assurances of progress and development. It seems unlikely that most of these old players remember being in the driving seat once, but with the absence of the foresight and impetus to carry out the promises they are doling out now.

Given the fact that there is a constraint of resources, both financial and infrastructure with the state government, it is of great concern when the people in power are still hell-bent on pilfering these limited resources for themselves without the least consideration or remorse, leading the public to start questioning the motive and the seemingly earnest efforts of the government to develop the state which is evidently enjoying certain perks and assistances from the central Government due to its underdeveloped status.

The state is yet to see a radical change in the system of governance with emphasis on transparency and efficiency. The various promises and agendas which were pushed on the face of the public during the election campaigns have been shelved for good, until the next one. On the other hand, a majority of us have cheapened ourselves by offering up our suffrage to the highest bidder. To cover up its shortcomings and deficiencies behind the excuse of a less than perfect world is nothing short of shirking its responsibility and a ploy to steal the riches and benefits meant for the public. What the public wants is a government that has the gumption to take calculated risks and pave new ways to initiate development and accelerate progress, one which can translate the aspirations of the people into concrete works and utilize the available resources efficiently. A Government more accessible to the common man which can expedite its development activities and which can effectively control and motivate its employees will surely win favors from the public. The present Government should realize that the increasingly informed public is getting restive for change and growth, and only those who have shown to deliver on their promises will endure. "To follow imperfect, uncertain, or corrupted traditions, in order to avoid erring in our own judgment, is but to exchange one danger for another" - Richard Whately, English rhetorician, logician, economist, and theologian.

Name changed

I, the undersigned, **Elangbam Ibetombi Devi** of Keishamthong Elangbam leikai, Imphal, PS Imphal, District- Imphal West, Manipur do hereby declare that, I have wholly renounced, relinquished and abandoned the use of old name **Ch. Ongbi Ibetombi**, as I have assumed my new name **Elangbam Ibetombi Devi**.

Sd/-
Elangbam Ibetombi Devi

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Sovereignty Struggles in Northeast India: Where are They Going?

(The write up published here is the paper presented by **M. S. Prabhakara** on the *Sixth Arambam Somorendra Singh Memorial Lecture held in Imphal on June 10, 2011*)

Modestly Immodest Disclaimers?

I feel greatly honoured by the invitation of the Arambam Somorendra Trust to give the Sixth Arambam Somorendra Singh Memorial Lecture today, the eleventh anniversary of his death. I am also overwhelmed by a feeling of inadequacy. What little I know about Arambam Somorendra was gathered well after his death. Indeed, when he was killed I was not even in India. I have since then come to know that he was a distinguished playwright, a social worker and the founder general secretary of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), one of the several organisations in Manipur engaged in an armed struggle to secure sovereignty and independence for Manipur.

I know a little bit more about Manipur, but not much, though I have visited the state many times. The first time was in 1967 when Manipur was still a Union Territory. I was then teaching at Guwahati University. I made the visit just out of curiosity about this 'remote' corner of the country, a fascination with the 'geographical and cultural edge of the periphery' that has persisted wherever I have lived. I have some vivid memories of that visit that was confined to Imphal. One, tasting for the first time an unusual dish marked on a board outside a small eatery in the Bazaar. I cannot recall which part. More memorable was meeting Maharajkumar Priyabrata Singh at his home. The suggestion that I should get him to talk to me for understanding the history and culture of Manipur was made by Smt. Devjani Chaliah / Meenakshi Basu, who I had come to know through a common friend, a colleague of her husband in the Indian Railways. In those days a person teaching at Guwahati University commanded some respect not merely in Assam but in the rest of the Northeast. If I remember right, Professor Gangmumei took me to his house, or I might have gone on my own. I remember the gracious courtesy, as also the large number of dogs and puppies having a free run of the large room where we sat and talked. During that conversation he spoke mostly of matters historical, of the ceding of the fertile Kabaw Valley to Burma and, with greater feeling of Molcham village whose people had been virtually cut off from the rest of Manipur though they were very much Indian citizens. He spoke glowingly of the fertile soil and the fine quality rice grown in Kabaw Valley. He even offered to take me there, warning that I should be prepared for a hard trek. He said nothing about himself, nothing about the circumstances of the annexation of Manipur. I did not then know that he could have told me a lot more.

After I gave up teaching in December 1975, became a professional journalist and joined The Hindu in June 1983, I have made several long visits and travelled a bit outside Imphal. Yet, I have always had a sense of inadequacy, of being an interloper, when writing on Manipur. Let me quote (and let me also confess, I have shamelessly plagiarised from my writings while writing this essay) from one of my more recent articles, "Insurgencies in Manipur: Politics and Ideology" (*The Hindu*, 28 January, 2010):

Every time one travels to Manipur, one returns humbled. This has been the case since my first visit to Manipur in the late 1960s, long before becoming a journalist. Active insurgency was not even on the horizon then though some resentment against 'India' was evident. Between 1983 and mid-1994 (when I moved to Johannesburg, South Africa) I visited the state at least once every year - more than once during some years. In the last eight years [that is, between 2002 and 2010] I have returned four [actually five] times. The feelings of inadequacy to confront and understand the complex situation in Manipur, the whys and wherefores of the insurgencies (the plural is advisedly used), the resilience of the ordinary people whose amazing creative energies thrive in the midst of all the pain and violence manifest in every walk of life, has only increased.

I am not posturing with false modesty; there are rational grounds for this sense of inadequacy. I stopped reporting on a day to day basis on developments in

what for the sake of convenience we may call 'Northeast India' in June 1994, when I moved to Johannesburg as *The Hindu's* correspondent in South and Southern Africa following the election of Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected President of South Africa. For the next eight years I did not live in NE India, though I did visit Guwahati briefly on holiday thrice during this period. My return to Guwahati in April 2002 also marked my formal retirement from *The Hindu*, which I had joined in July 1983 as its correspondent in Guwahati with the responsibility covering Assam and the neighbouring four states and two Union territories in the region, all of which in the heyday of 'regional nationalism' used to be projected as the Seven Sisters, bound together with a supposed commonality of history, culture and above all memories posited by the ideologues of that perspective as contrary to, indeed opposed to, the 'pan-Indian' history, culture and memories.

As some friends in this audience may perhaps know, I was born and grew up in Kolar, a small district town in what at the time of my birth in 1936 the princely state of Mysore, now Karnataka. My home language is Kannada. Between 1962 and 2010 I lived in Guwahati barring two breaks of eight years each. Though, due to circumstances partly of my own thoughtless making and partly not in my control, I had to move in March last year to Kolar, to the old house by father built way back in 1939, even now I feel more at home in Guwahati, my home on and off for forty eight years, and other parts of this region than anywhere else, barring perhaps Bombay, Johannesburg and Cape Town where too I lived for several years. One's heart is where one's passions are engaged. During this period, I have made many friends, and also some enemies, in this region, for making enemies is the true sign of acculturation and absorption. I have also tried to study and understand the political, social and cultural environment and milieu of this region, in particular the interlinked issues of identity assertions, separatism, autonomy, sovereignty, culminating in insurgency movements, all inseparable from the history of the land and the memories of its people. However, I remain committed not so much to the Indian State, which is after all a mere geographical construct, but to the idea of a genuinely democratic India of a variety of pluralist, contrary and dissenting perspectives. My only identity is that of an Indian, in an inclusive and the broadest sense of the term. It is within that framework that I have tried to understand the sovereignty struggles in the region and the issues that animate them. To put the point without any ambiguity, I am a sympathetic student of these struggles trying to learn; I am not a partisan. I do not want my inclusive Indian-ness to be diminished in any manner. Nor do I want to live in an India where my fellow Indians too feel diminished, as is undoubtedly the case with many people in the region who do feel, due to various historical circumstances so diminished, who cannot with the same confidence (or it is arrogance?) assert that they are Indians.

When I arrived in Guwahati in January 1962 to join the Guwahati University, I did not know Assamese or any other language spoken in NE India. Though I acquired a working knowledge of Assamese towards the end of my first stint in Guwahati (January 1962-December 1975) and that knowledge has slightly improved over the years, I still have only a 'working knowledge', a euphemism that conceals the reality of ignorance of the language. To some extent, as is the case with many who have Assamese, I can follow a bit of Bangla. But of the other numerous languages spoken in this region I know nothing. This is certainly the case with Manipuri, under whatever nomenclature.

I have thus the most superficial journalistic understanding of current events and developments in this state gathered from English language

newspapers published from Imphal, Guwahati and Calcutta: some historical background gained from literature published in English, and, above all, from conversations with friends some of them going back to my GU days. Of the complex history and culture and memories of the state and the people that are in some cases not commonly shared by all the people, the milieu that my audience instinctively knows, I know less than nothing. More mortifying to me is the fact that in my active days as a reporter, I could not negotiate my way even in Imphal without the company and assistance of friends. When I travelled outside Imphal, I was totally at sea, a mere metaphor in this land locked state, without some friend to give tongue to me, in every sense of the term. Since I am going to speak on sovereignty struggles in the region including in Manipur, I thought I would place on record these serious impediments that have affected my understanding and analysis of what may broadly be called the Nationality Question in this region, the core issue that has given rise to these sovereignty struggles. These struggles have been going on for long, in the case of the Naga people long before the state of Nagaland was constituted. In a historical context such struggles are not even unique to this region, Scepticism about the emerging Great Indian Nation, and anxieties about what would happen to the smaller nationalities were evident even in the so-called mainstream India whose people, like those of Northeast, had actively participated in the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress Party.

I propose to discuss these struggles in the context of some recent developments since April 2002, when I returned to Guwahati after an eight year absence. This is because these struggles have taken a qualitatively different form, especially in their tactics, in their reading of the wider correlation of forces nationally, in the context of the growing consolidation of what is officially characterised as 'left wing extremism' (LWE) and internationally, in the context of the 'dissolution of the Soviet Union (1990-91), and the subsequent disintegration of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia after a prolonged civil war (1991-95), beginning of the declaration of independence by three constituent republics of the Federation, Slovenia, Macedonia and Croatia and, above all, the developments in Montenegro in May 2006. It is not accidental that one of the few places in India where the referendum in Montenegro and its subsequent declaration of independence were discussed at a public meeting was this very city, Imphal.

Varieties of Separatism

Though any reporting, or even serious academic discussion, of the problems of separatism in post-independence India concentrates almost exclusively on this phenomenon in this region, beginning with the Naga insurgency, the fact is that the sense of diminishment within the larger context of the Indian state that I referred to earlier is not unique to the people of this region. One of the oldest separatist movements in the country, going well back into the years before independence, is the so-called Dravidian movement in the old Madras Presidency, superficially seeming to be inspired by anti-Brahmin, anti-Hindi and anti 'North India' sentiments but with profound economic and cultural dimensions. This has had many offshoots. Apart from the DMK, and the AIADMK, the two 'natural parties' of government in Tamilnadu, there are several other clones of this mindset occupying significant political space in the state even now. Separatism itself may now be a dormant sentiment, but even at the suggestion of a possible threat to Tamil 'national' interests like the dispute over the sharing of the waters of the Kaveri, for instance, these assert themselves forcing even the so-called national parties to follow suit. Though the Dravidian parties in India have more or less given up on these aspirations in terms of practical politics, the vast Tamil Diaspora with rich material and intellectual resources still cherishes fantasies of some kind of a sovereign Tamil state that would include the Tamil speaking areas of Sri Lanka,

this despite the fact that Sri Lankan Tamils have a low opinion of the Indian Tamils, disdaining them as contaminated by their larger non-Tamil environment, and so less Tamil than themselves.

Indeed, anxieties about what would happen to the smaller nationalities vis a vis the numerically larger nationalities inhabiting the so-called Presidency provinces, what Professor Amalendu Guha has theorised as the complex linkages and rivalries between Great Nationalism and Little Nationalism in India, revolving round religion, language and caste, and 'ethnicity' were present even during colonial times. These acquired a peculiar urgency in the years before the transfer of power. Those two seminal, and also self-serving, accounts by V. P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India* and *The Story of the Integration of Indian States*, provide numerous instances of such anxieties and rivalries, as also of the manoeuvres and plain skulduggery that accompanied the integration of states into what was designed to be a homogeneous Indian nation state. People of Manipur (and Tripura) would know too well the sordid details. Menon's book devotes just a paragraph to the 'sorting out' of the problems of Manipur and Tripura in Shillong.

Anxieties about 'fissiparous tendencies' was not a post-independence phenomenon; they were a constant in the political deliberations of the Congress party and used to feature even in the most rambling of Jawaharlal Nehru's speeches. One need not go into the well-known challenges posed to the process of integration of states in the princely states of Hyderabad, Jammu and Kashmir and Junagad, all of which tried to be independent countries. One of them, J&K, still festers. The case of the so-called Khalistan is part of the living memory, though it was the creation of the ruling party itself to weaken an entrenched regional political formation in Punjab. However, there were other, probably equally serious moves to secure independence from many other princely states as well during the integration process, especially in the various kingdoms and principalities of what was then known as Rajputana. The case of Jodhpur state with a common border to Pakistan is well-known. Indeed, such sovereignty aspirations were present in the most unlikely cases like the State of Travancore in Deep South. It is not as if these arose only because of the unique and volatile conditions that prevailed in the period between the formal granting of independence, the lapse of paramountcy, and the complex process of negotiating with these princely states their position in the new Indian state. Indeed, though not as straightforward sovereignty aspirations, such sentiments about the loss of real or imagined sovereignty in a feudal past, that was oppressive and is moreover dead and gone, are even now dormant in some cases. Nostalgia for the past comes easily, especially when one is certain that the past cannot come back. For instance, since my return to Karnataka a little over a year ago I have sometimes sensed a corresponding sense of alienation vis-à-vis 'India', a resentment against the dominant presence of non-Kannadigas in Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka, in crucial sectors of the economy (like the IT sector) among the 'indigene' of Karnataka. One has only to read the Kannada language press and even more so, the numerous Kannada blogs, to sense such sentiments. While the special circumstances relating to Manipur's annexation/accession to the Union of India did not obtain in the princely state of Mysore, in some perspectives the 'core' of the State of Karnataka, there does exist a peculiar and quite unjustified nostalgia about the state's feudal past, even its colonial past as in Bangalore where the word 'colonial' especially in relation to urban architecture has acquired connotations of beauty, romance, elegance, even chivalry, though when this past is stretched farther back to cover the regimes of Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan, also feudal, other passions and anxieties prevail. In other words, separatist aspirations from within the component units of a constituted state are not unique.

(To be contd. tomorrow)