

Editorial

Friday, May. 18, 2018

Of 3 Ws - Beware

It takes a lifetime to build up a reputation but a moment to ruin it. The adage couldn't have been truer than for people who are constantly in the glare of the public. It would indeed prove a difficult task for anyone to tread the line and balance the private and public side of oneself. This is the inconvenient choice one has had to make when the decision to spend one's life in the public domain is made. And given the inherently instinctive nature of man, it would be an understatement to say that every step that an individual takes is fraught with temptations, enticements and influences that could and often lead to disastrous results. A restive society such as ours is often a hotbed for various forms of enticements, corruptions and temptations as have been experiencing by the public till the present day.

The recent uproar by one students' body and some few other civil society organisations in the state regarding the disrespecting of victims of rape is a serious issue and need to be pondered upon as it will reflect the mindset of those in power.

War, by its very definition is the state of armed conflict between different groups- political, ethnical, social, religion or financial. While there is a perceptible improvement in the situation in the state regarding administration of law and order, it would be a blunder for anyone to assume that the society has returned to normalcy. However, credit must be given where it is due and it would not be much further from the truth to state that the Biren-led state government has managed to make exemplary headway in steering the society towards the path to peace and reconciliation and as a result the general feeling of the public has been an upbeat one. The air of uncertainty and suspicion that was hanging like a suffocating shroud over the entire state has been lifted, replaced by a palpable feeling of bonhomie and appreciative gestures all around. However, it would be a premature move to hark on the achievements if one could term it as such because the present situation should rather be viewed as a deliberate beginning towards a long and arduous journey.

Wine, and all drinks alcoholic has been portrayed as a cause for many a misery in the society, and not without any reason. And yet, it has been accepted and offered as a drink for the gods among some faiths and has been an integral part of rituals and cultures for since time immemorial. And the so-called ban on alcohol in the state is but a half-hearted joke which is neither beneficial nor effective. The issue should be on regulation and awareness rather than on total prohibition which only encourage unscrupulous bootleggers and spurious products, not to mention the loss of precious income to the state. The most pragmatic solution would be to lift the prohibition and instead enforce strict regulations on sales and consumption.

Women have been proven to induce cognitive impairment in men according to scientific experiments. Wars have been fought and dynasties have been laid waste on account of women since ancient times beginning with when Adam fell prey to Eve's words despite god's warning. Cut to the present, our society is no exception and there are more instances than one would care to acknowledge of the influence and sway women holds over men who are in positions of power and authority. There is the ever present threat of well-meaning and righteous leaders giving in to the emotional manipulations and wiles of women who managed to capture their attention and interest, and if the past is any indication it would only be right for the public leaders to exercise caution in this regard else all efforts and intents will come to naught along with their reputations. The worst loser will be the public who will ultimately bear the brunt of such foolish indulgences.

It is at this point that anything related to the insult of women need to be tackled with due seriousness.

This write up is an excerpt from Prof. Angomcha Bimol's speech delivered on 10th June 2012 under the title "Towards a Wholesome Holistic Self On Silence, Identity and Coloniality of the Postcolonial", on occasion of Arambam Somorendra Memorial Lecture here in Imphal

Ladies and gentlemen, I request you to rekindle your intimacy with stories. For, in the course of this lecture, I shall be sharing some familiar and, perhaps, some not-so-familiar, stories of, about and on Manipur and her people as a way of searching for, what I shall call, a wholesome holistic self. In order to communicate that search, a quest that seeks to transcend, amongst others, the fragmentation and estrangement that mark our society and polity today, I have titled the lecture 'Towards A Wholesome Holistic Self: On Silence, Identity, and Coloniality of the Postcolonial'. Since a search for self is an existential question, I might as well begin the search by sharing an incident from my personal story, with a hope that, along the way, you will also find echoes of your experiences in the inflections or shades and hues of this story and the other stories that I shall share with you today. Some fifteen odd years ago, as a part of my doctoral research at Delhi University, I went to interview a gentleman who arguably occupied a significant place in the socio-cultural and political life of 'postcolonial' Manipur. The meeting, arranged through a close family friend, was unexpectedly very brief. But it was long enough to put my interview skill as a young researcher through a crucial test. With a palpable enthusiasm of encountering the 'field', there I was, sitting face to face with this gentleman, who was then in his late 50s, thin and not particularly impressive or imposing as I had expected him to be, to hear and record the reality from the 'horse's mouth'. But hardly had I expected the meeting to be the one as ultimately it turned out to be. Sitting on a *more* in his courtyard, the gentleman went through the pages with printed sentences – that were meant to be parts of a 'scale' to measure people's view on certain political questions. Besides wanting to elicit his views on certain issues and questions related to my research, I needed his judgement on whether those sentences reflect the stand or political belief of a certain section of our society. After going through the pages for a few minutes, he told me that he would not like to give his opinion on the matter! I was taken aback, and did

not know what to do for a while. However, I managed to break the uneasy silence that followed his refusal with an edgy smile – on retrospect, a smile that communicated a mixture of innocence and helplessness of a young student – and I tried to confront the situation by explaining the 'neutrality' and purpose of my research while simultaneously pleading with him to share his views. However, my repeated attempts to engage him on the issues of my research interests could only elicit a consistent refusal from him, and his demeanour that remained calm throughout the meeting matched my increasing sense of desperation. Punctuated by pauses and uneasy silences, and a sense of *déjà vu* born out of the cycles of pleading from my side and firm refusal on his part, and hope and despair moving back and forth, the encounter that lasted barely half an hour or so was like a frozen space-time zone wherein I was caught with that soft-spoken gentleman. At the end of it all, the only concession he was ready to give in to my persistent effort was that I could talk to his brother, who, he said, also knew all that I wanted to know from him.

Ladies and gentlemen, call it coincidence or destiny, I am standing in front of you to deliver

the first Memorial Lecture instituted in the name of that gentleman, Shri (Late) Arambam Somorendra (1935-2000), whose contribution to Manipuri literature and theatre as well as a strand of political awakening that has come to mark the State since 1960s need no introduction. That day, after meeting him, I did come back disappointed, all the way home contemplating the alternative strategies to fill in the vacuum created by his refusal. But it has been a decade and half since that day when I met late Ojha Somorendra for an interview; and in the course of my professional journey that began with the doctoral research programme at Delhi University, I have also learned, and taught students and researchers, on matters related to research in Social Science, including issues pertaining to situations similar to the one I had found myself in once with Ojha

Somorendra. However, an aspect that underlies his refusal continues to baffle and bother me even today. Mr Chairperson, I believe that his refusal that day was not alien to the characteristic silence that has haunted Manipur for a long time. It is a silence that reveals the obvious suspicion and fear that inhabit the hearts and minds of the people in the State. But the question is: does this silence mean anything more than this commonsense awareness that the silence indicates suspicion and fear amongst the people? The answer is yes. To the trained eyes of a student of social science, this silence also reveals the presence of an oppressive condition that undermines the freedom and creativity of the people, and its consequences. With the freedom and creativity of the people subverted, the silence points to the prospect or reality of the stagnation and bankruptcy of ideas and means to lead a better life, and a subverted capacity and resilience to deal with exigencies effectively and efficiently. It reveals helplessness and hopelessness amongst the people as they slip further into the quagmire of decadence.

Besides, this silence also speaks of the death of the conscience keepers of the society, death of those who are responsible for ensuring its health against odds. It is worth remembering that history is replete with stories of people who sailed against all odds to effect reformation and transformation or bring about radical and revolutionary changes in their societies. Thus, with freedom and creativity being undermined, the death of those conscience keepers, such silence could very well be an uncanny announcement of the absence of virtue, courage, and ability of a people to survive as a collectivity. Sometimes I also wonder whether the silence has become a living testimony of our own complicity in the making of what Manipur has become for sometime now. For, the silence feeds, and also gets fed, by the cynicism of the helpless (and the cowards?), the twisted logics of myopic visions of the powerful, the blurred boundary between the informed views and rhetoric and hearsays, the forsaken public

We ought to remind ourselves that those forces which nurture and legitimize the silence are working against our well-being, both as individuals and as a collectivity. Therefore, our survival as a healthy and productive people would depend on our capacity to confront, and undo the detrimental effects of, the deafening silence that has been haunting Manipur. I am sure that there are many in Manipur today who, although numbered by the prevailing circumstances, still dare to hope, or secretly fantasize, to break this haunting silence. As I understand it, public lectures such as this one, is a pointer to that longing.

A Sick Society That Manufactures Failures – the True Face of Education in India

By Avijit Pathak
Courtesy: The Wire

Board exams... Entrance tests for medical/engineering colleges... College admissions: where are the youngsters moving? What does growing up mean with the euphoria of success and the stigma of failure? What is the experience of walking through a path defined by others – regimented schools and market-driven forces?

Let me begin with the story of a young boy I have been interacting with for quite some time. Yes, he is in the 'science' stream; what is popularly known as PCM (Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics) is his religion and possibly a road to what the aspirational middle class society regards as 'success' – or the moment of being 'settled'.

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With a series of private tutors, coaching centres and exam after exam for getting entry into any of the engineering/medical colleges, there is no breathing space in the life of this 17-year old boy. He is anxious; his parents are worried. Sometimes I feel like talking to him about poetry and cinema, literature and travelogue; he thinks it is useless and his parents too are not very interested in these 'softer' dimensions of life. Every moment, they are compelled to think, has to be utilised for achieving 'success'.

With my sociological sensibilities, I know that he is not alone – he symbolises a social fact, he is the product of an oppressive reality characterised by a faulty pattern of education, parental ambitions and the aggression of hyper-competitiveness resulting from the

increasing gap between the number of aspirants and availability of opportunities in an over-populated and uneven society like ours. Let us try to understand the resultant malady destroying the possibilities innate in the young mind.

'Success' has failed them

What is the nature of the mythical 'success' they are striving for? First, in the age of trade and economic utility, it is based on the hierarchy of disciplines. Science/commerce is seen to be superior, practical and lucrative, but a negative orientation is attached to arts/humanities – these 'soft'/feminine disciplines, is thought, have no 'future', and 'intelligent' students are not supposed to opt for these branches of knowledge.

Anyone familiar with school education in India knows how parents and teachers pressurise children to opt for science/commerce even if they are not inclined to it. In fact, many of them are never given the space to look at themselves, and understand their unique traits and aptitudes. This is the beginning of

alienation in the child's life. This alienation is further intensified when the societal pressure restricts their imagination, and forces them to believe that life is necessarily dark and bleak without medical science/engineering/management.

In this reckless preparation for 'success' their alienated selves find no joy, no ecstasy; coaching centres have no humour, guide books are devoid of creative imagination, 'success mantras' require war strategies, not the spirit of wonder, and the joy of learning is replaced by the neurotic urge to be a 'topper'. Second, this 'success' is centred on the hierarchy of professions. Money, technocratic sleekness and state power – these three factors play a key role in the making of this hierarchy. In fact, if one is courageous enough to decipher the folk tale of the 'IIT-IIM syndrome', one would realise that a mix of money

and technological sleekness transforms their 'products' into corporate professionals with a good pay package.

In fact, 'placement' (your destiny is to find yourself as a well-fed/well-paid employee of the gigantic corporation) is the success index in a society that sanctifies technocratic capitalism; everything revolves around it. No wonder, in popular imagination a youngster – hardly 23-years-old – working as an IT professional in a multinational company and living in a gated community in Bengaluru is considered to be more 'successful' than, say, a 50-year old college teacher living in the suburb of Mumbai, and writing a scholarly book on medieval Indian history. Furthermore, state power still has its aura. In our society, it reinforces the legacy of feudal aristocracy. No wonder, as the UPSC phenomenon

suggests, the job of a district collector or a superintendent of police or an income tax officer (imagine their bungalows, office vehicles with red lights, and the brigade of police constables saluting them) continues to fascinate the young mind, particularly from the small towns.

No wonder, like the IIT/IIM entrance test, the UPSC civil service examination seems to have become one of the major national events – the most dominant evaluator for certifying one's 'success' in life. However, this 'success', as I wish to argue, has its own discontents. The reason is that, for most of them, it is an immensely alienating experience. It kills one's creativity; it makes one one-dimensional; it robs one of the spirit of positive life-energy.

(Contd. on Page 3)

Story of Silence

2

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