

Editorial

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Remembering the past famine while on the way to another famine

The history of Manipur had witnessed two Nupi Lals in 1904 and 1939 as a result of artificial famine during British rule. Few decades later followed the students' movement in 1965 against another artificial famine post annexation of Manipur by India. All three uprisings were revolts against the ruling government of the respective period that enabled the rich mayang businessmen to get hold of our food and trade it for their personal benefits. Innumerable lives suffered and many died fighting for the blood of the poor and against the system of the rich. As we remember the fight against the artificial famines from the past, we also need to remember that history repeats and another artificial famine is on its way. At present, people of Manipur, especially the poor, are facing the burden of the scarcity of food along with the current soaring price of rice and local foodgrains. The very basic necessities are sold at a price that is hardly affordable for people with low income in this time of job scarcity. On the other hand, farmers are struggling and finding it difficult to grow foodgrains in the paddy fields because of no rainfall and lack of irrigation facilities. Farmers had to pay the price of the delayed and deficient monsoon. It took away their sources of income and left them empty handed at the time of this crisis. Had there been a well-planned irrigation system, the problem could have been avoided at least in some way or the other. On top of this, there has been claims of irregularities in rice distribution under National Food Security Act, either in terms of the price or quantity or frequency. It is necessary to check if the Public distribution essential items are reaching the deserving citizens or not, and not just give a clarification of well-maintained documentation of distribution by the state.

It is crucial to hear from the people and confirm if they are getting what they are supposed to be getting at the right price and time. Amidst the delayed monsoon, price hike, and irregular distributions, another major contributing factor to the nearing famine is the exploitation of workers/farmers, their lands, and sources of livelihood. For instance, the construction of Maphithel dam has destroyed the whole of Chadong village and their entire paddy field. This huge blow has created a crisis in their livelihood and worsened their daily struggle. How are they going to afford the skyrocketing prices of rice with no proper sources of income while battling to start their lives all over again? The same dam construction has also badly affected the people in and around Nungbrang village.

Sand and stone quarrying used to be their main source of income but the accumulation of stone and sand also drastically declined after the dam construction. To top it all, the recent ban on quarrying has deprived them of their only source of livelihood. All of this has resulted in the villagers struggling to find an alternative, including wood cutting in the hills and clearing of forests. This sudden shift in finding ways to survive has added up to the already existing struggle of the families, some to the extent of losing family members. While the benefits of price hike, irregularities of rice distribution, and dam constructions etc have landed in the pockets of a few rich people, the prices are paid by the poor and with their blood. Therefore, it is the duty of the government, the people, and concerned citizens to look into this holistically and take up necessary steps to fix the land and help the poor in order to avoid another artificial famine.

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Referendum in Catalonia

By-Bruce Pebam, Secretary HRD, AMSU

Catalonia! A small nation in north-eastern Spain inhabited by the Catalan people, who are significantly different from the majority of Spaniards in many aspects including culture, language and history. For years, the 7.5 million Catalan people have been kept under the unjust subjugation of those in power in Madrid. Deep inside their hearts, the Catalan people have always had the desire and aspiration for self-determination and all this culminated in a large extent to the Catalan Independence Referendum in October 2017 under the stewardship of the regional Catalan government. The basis of Catalan Nationalism stands mainly on the principle of resistance against the efforts of Spanish Government to impose greater Spanish culture on the Catalan people. Preservation of their own unique identity and culture is the main driving force behind the Catalan independence movement. The movement has been fuelled by fears of dilution of Catalan identity by the majority Spaniards, and the realization that continued union with Spain could one day result in their 'extinction' as a nation. Catalans have not forgotten in their hearts and minds that before their union with Spain in the 16th century, they were a proud independent nation for almost 250 years.

Oppression of Catalan identity and culture reached its zenith during the military dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939-1975). Catalans feared whether they would lose their identity altogether. The subjugation was so complete that Franco's administration put a ban on the cultural practice of Castell, a Catalan practice of making human towers/pillars during important festivals and ceremonies, a unique symbol of Catalan identity. Catalan parents were prevented from giving their children traditional Catalan names, and the administration instead emphasised on giving the children Spanish names. The use of the Catalan language was severely restricted, even in the areas around Valencia and the Balearic Islands. There was tight censorship on books and publications published in the Catalan language. The situation was similar for many minority communities throughout Spain, but it seemed that the Catalans found themselves at the biggest receiving end as Franco sought to unify Spain by force. The administration in Madrid was well aware of the Catalan peoples' aspirations, and it sought to subjugate them to the maximum extent. Catalan Nationalism thus could not gather much pace during the Franco regime.

However, after General Franco passed away in 1976, voices of Catalan self-determination grew louder once again. Under the new 1978 Spanish constitution, Catalonia was given greater autonomy. A statute that was enforced in 2006 gave more powers to the Catalan people. It gave them more economic autonomy and upgraded them to the status of a 'Nation' in their own right. However just four years later in 2010, the Spanish Constitutional Court amended much of the provisions of the 2006 statute and removed many clauses that gave greater autonomy to the Catalan people. This act enraged the Catalan regional authority and the Catalan people as a whole. Removal of greater autonomy, increasing economic recession and cutting down on public spending all increased the anger in the hearts and minds of the Catalan people and this culminated in the unofficial Catalan independence

referendum of November 2014. Almost 5.4 million voters exercised their franchise and 80% of them favoured complete independence from Spain.

Close on the heels of the events of this independence referendum, the Catalan people elected a pro-independence party (Junts pel Si/ Together for Yes) to power in the 2015 regional elections. The party soon set out on its quest to hold a legal, binding independence referendum against the provisions of the Spanish Constitution. The Catalan regional government led by President Carles Puigdemont announced that a legal, binding independence referendum would be held on 1st of October, 2017, further asserting that the Catalan people had moral, economic, cultural and political rights to live separately as an independent nation. However, the Spanish government in Madrid called the proposed referendum unconstitutional and announced that they would do everything possible to stop the vote from going ahead as planned. The Spanish government argued that the proposed referendum was illegal under the 1978 constitution. They argued that the constitution did not give the power to any Spanish province to hold referendums for self-determination. In March 2017, the Spanish government barred the former Catalan president Artur Mas from holding any sort of public office on the pretext that the 2014 unofficial referendum organised by his government was against the Law. Legal action was also taken against many members of the Catalan regional authority on charges of supporting the holding of the independence referendum in October 2017. Civil officers of the Spanish Guard raided the offices and buildings of the Catalan regional authority and arrested 14 people including the Secretary for Economic Affairs and the Secretary for Taxation. The Spanish police destroyed nearly 10 million ballot papers that were to be used for the referendum. Not only that, they also picked up and destroyed hundreds of pamphlets and posters meant to be used for the Catalan independence referendum. They were hell bent on not allowing the independence referendum to go ahead as planned. The magnitude of policemen and security personnel that descended on the parts of Catalonia to stop the referendum from going ahead was not seen even during the many years of the Spanish government's struggle against the Basque insurgency in Northern Spain. This only exposed the authoritarian mentality of the Spanish Government in dealing with the legitimate aspirations of the Catalan people.

What was even more surprising and shocking was the European Union (EU) refusing to intervene into the matter, maintaining that it was an 'internal issue' of Spain. This left the Catalan people with a number of questions to the EU leadership. What would any nation think if hordes of security personnel descended on their parts, on their streets? If this had happened in somewhere like the UK, would they have remained silent? How can the treatment of local politicians and journalists as terrorists, how can their dragging out and arrest from their offices and homes be brushed off as an internal matter? Despite all the draconian restrictions by the Spanish authorities, the Catalan Independence referendum was held quite successfully with over 4.3 million people turning out to vote. 92% of the voters supported complete independence from Spain and this only affirmed the determination of the Catalan people to live as a free nation in their own right.

At this juncture, it is only fitting that we remember the contribution of Catalan President Carles Puigdemont, for he was the one who brought the movement to that stage. It is most fortunate for all Catalans that a leader like him was born amongst them. Despite the Spanish Constitutional Court maintaining that the referendum was illegal, in the aftermath of the referendum results the Catalan Parliament on October 27, 2017 declared that Catalonia was an independent and free country. As soon as this declaration was made, the Spanish Government in Madrid evoked Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution to impose direct central rule on the region of Catalonia. Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy deposed the Catalan President Carles Puigdemont and his cabinet from their respective posts. Not only this, eight ministers were charged with attempting to wage war against the Spanish state with their words and actions and sent to jail. They were also falsely framed with corruption charges. This was a glaring display of fascist mentality, despite Spain claiming to be democratic country. An arrested Catalan leader expressed that if they thought this was natural, they would not be able to live as Catalans anymore. His words carried a deep significance. It showed how much the Catalan leaders loved their motherland.

As soon as the Catalan Parliament announced that Catalonia was independent, the Spanish High Court summoned Carles Puigdemont and 13 of his government's cabinet ministers to appear in court. Only nine of the ministers appeared in court. Out of the nine, eight of them were arrested and only one was let go. President Puigdemont maintained that the dissolution of the Catalan Parliament was a war on democracy and refused to go to court. Instead, he and some of his ministers went to Brussels, the EU Headquarters. Meanwhile charges were framed against President Puigdemont and four of his cabinet ministers by the Spanish National Court for not attending court as ordered by the Spanish Constitutional Court. Arrest warrants against them were issued and sent to the Belgian Government to apprehend them. Just because Mr. Puigdemont and some of his cabinet colleagues went to Belgium, it does not mean that they ran away like cowards from their motherland. Brussels being the headquarters of the European Parliament and other notable organizations, they went there to spread awareness to the whole world about the atrocious actions being taken up by the Spanish authorities against the wishes of the Catalan people. Puigdemont himself affirmed this when he came to a village called Vilhaour near his birthplace where he signed a pact (Farmhouse Pact) with the Deputy Chief of the Catalan National Assembly. They agreed to take part in the scheduled elections to the Catalonian Parliament, the date for which had been fixed on December 21st by the Spanish Government. The main reason behind the agreement was that they were confident of yet another victory in the said election. They regarded it as a third referendum for Catalan independence. With the peoples' mandate on their side, they could further pursue their goal of self-determination. They could show to the world the steadfast will of the Catalan people. During the meeting at Vilhaour, Puigdemont told his followers that he would gladly spend 30 years in jail for the Catalan independence movement and he had no regrets whatsoever should it ever come to that situation. His statement only re-affirmed the steadfast determination of the

Catalan leadership to pursue the matter of Catalan independence come what may!

We need to ask some crucial questions at this stage. Why would someone like Carles Puigdemont who is the head of a stable provincial government in a well-to-do country like Spain risk everything for the sake of Catalan independence? He could easily live a carefree life with the resources at his disposal. Why do the Catalan people feel that nothing could be more important than their independence?

We should analyse what are the differences between our Manipuri people and the Catalan people, two lands faced with similar circumstances. What are the differences between Mr. Puigdemont and our own leaders who kneel before those in power in Delhi whenever they are told to do so, and why the differences? We need to find an objective reason for these crucial differences. How has the courage and determination of our own people come to differ so greatly from that of the Catalan people despite sharing numerous historical circumstances?

Economy of a place gives us a window into a place's lifestyle and the mindset of the people. For this reason, it is important that we discuss the economic life of the Manipuri society and the Catalan society. It is a known and agreed fact that the first step to colonisation of a place is the takeover of the local economy. Catalonia has been repeatedly stressing that they give more to Spain than what Spain has given them. Although the Catalans only make up 15% of Spain's population, they contribute 20% to the total GDP of the country. 35% of Spain's income from foreign trade comes through Catalonia's ports and harbours. Therefore it is well and truly clear that Catalonia has an independent self-sufficient economy, and they don't need to beg for resources from Spain. In this way, they've never felt any sense of inferiority to Spain and they feel that they are capable of living independently. Meanwhile, it is a completely opposite case in Manipur. Every aspect of our economy is controlled by India. We literally do not have any viable economy of our own. Our state administration literally survives on funds from the central government in New Delhi. Our roads, bridges, healthcare services, educational facilities are all dependent on funds given to us by New Delhi. In other words, we survive on the resources allotted to us by New Delhi. Any disruption in this and our society would literally come to a standstill. This is one of the main reasons why we've become so afraid of 'independence', for the fear of resource shortage is too great that it has become engrained in the public psyche.

Being skilled in the art of politics in Manipuri society is nothing but the ability to dance according to the whims and fancies of those in power in New Delhi. Elections are frequently won by political parties who seem most likely to garner surplus funds from New Delhi. The mentality of our society has never progressed from that of a servant who relies on the good graces of his master for survival. The race for political power in Manipur is nothing but a race to become a slave of New Delhi. In such a situation, forget aspiring for another Manipur. This is the reason why our leaders view anyone who brings up the issue of independence as 'anti-national' while in Catalonia Puigdemont himself led his people in aspiring for self-determination. It is now imperative that in order to strengthen our society as a whole we need to build up and strengthen our local economy.

We shall overcome someday.