

Editorial

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Something more needed

The one basic thing that could make much of almost everything much easier, simpler and smoother, yet seemingly impossible to accomplish is the act of coming clean. It would indeed take a much greater strength of character to own up to our mistakes and shortcomings, and still greater willpower to refrain from deliberately committing acts we consciously know is wrong and false.

The few fortunate ones who have the grit and will to transcend these urges are acknowledged and respected, even revered. On the other hand, a new breed of "Go-Getters" who would not stop at anything to achieve their goal is on the rise- the pressures of present day society helping in developing and pruning such mindset to perfection.

They are the restless, hyperactive and aggressive ones who do not cater to emotions and aesthetics. Modern parents and guardians are increasingly urging their wards to adopt the letter approach towards life in order to carve out a place in the society that invariably results in a level of respect- respect that again is dependent on the earning capacity, the social circle adopted and living status maintained. Increasing compulsions for security in terms of food, shelter and a step towards a more secure future could be the factors that prompted the collective thinking towards adopting such an attitude towards life. But then, does that justify the adage "All is fair and love and war"? Is our life becoming a daily struggle, a battle- if not a war, we are destined to wage every single living day of our lives? Where does that leave us with any room or opportunity for improvement- not the financial kind, but a more rounded and holistic one as a person? The present developments in the society - particularly that of mindless atrocities and lack of considerations that is becoming rampant would be, to a large part, a spill-off of this new approach towards life. Greed takes precedence over everything else, making our lives worse off than when we started. What then could be the panacea for these aberrations that has come to plague our lives of late?

The answer lies within us- common knowledge which just needs to be acknowledged, and more importantly to act on. Putting up a façade of make-believe and a show of benevolence and righteousness will not absolve anyone of the crimes and wrongs.

This is of utmost importance for everyone, and more so for those who are donning the role of public representatives. Concepts like beauty, peace and harmony can only be experienced if we can rise above our petty urges and look at life- that of ourselves and the ones around us in a different and totally new perspective- one that does not have anything to do with wealth, power or fame. But how does one explain these "abstract" concepts, even after knowing them to be true, to someone struggling to earn a square meal on a daily basis? Aren't there adequate schemes and programs to alleviate these basic sufferings being borne by a majority of the people in the State? How do these people who are consistently trying to find any menial job just to earn enough to eat come to know of these schemes if they are not informed, and more importantly, assist them in getting their fair share? Who would not want a little extra, even inspite of having more than everything they could possibly ever need in life?

The best persons to validate this observation will be in the performance of those in whose hands are the reign of power and affairs of the State.

"The earth has enough to satisfy man's needs but not man's greed": Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

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United Nations Human Rights: The Manipur Experience

(This write up is the speech delivered by Babloo Loitongbam at the 14th Arambam Somorendra Memorial Lecture organised by The Aramam Somorendra Trust held at Lamyanba Sanglen Palace Compound, Imphal East)

INTRODUCTION

I vaguely remember the day I paid my first visit to Arambam Somorendra sometime in the late 1990s, perhaps to invite him for a human rights program. But what I vividly recall is the first words that he had uttered to me: "Nakhoi nadhoun dudi eikhoi etao sanarake-bani ne!" (Your grand father was a great buddy of mine!). Indeed when my maternal grandfather, (L) Karam Manamohan, produced the first Manipuri film in 1971, it was Arambam's play, *Tirtha Jatra*, rechristened as *Matamgi Manipur* that was put up in the silver screen. They collectively ushered Manipur into the emerging and exciting world of cinema.

I have little memory of those momentous times, as I was then hardly a year old. But almost half a century later, I cannot imagine how my grandfather would react if only he could witness this moment – me standing in front of you all to deliver this lecture in memory of his great friend.

My relation with Arambam Somorendra was just warming up when he had been violently snatched away from us by an assassin's bullet on 10th June, 2000. How I wish I could have spent some more time with this great soul to gain a deeper insight into his vision. However, I began to realize gradually that his vision has already been embedded and immortalized by the legacies he had left behind in various sectors of our society. I remember singing *Chaikhre Ngashi Nang-gi Loubukia* with great passion in our school functions. Only to realize, much later, that these ideas of striving for human dignity, emancipation of the downtrodden, patriotism, national awakening, etc. that were interspersed in the songs and plays nurturing the young Manipuri minds, were in fact flowing out from the great soul.

I grew up during the "tape recorders era", much before YouTube and mobile phones took over. Part of my family collection was a cassette of one of Arambam's radio dramas, *Hingnanaba Hingba*, and that was by far the most popular drama during my childhood days in my household. The cassette has gone long time ago, but a dialogue of that drama is still stuck with me even today. When the rich and powerful smuggler, drunk and frustrated in finding his syndicate crumbling in front of his own eyes, reflected philosophically to his friend about the purpose of life. He asked:

Karin eikhoi meejoobana punshida taranibara? Macha mashunnganabara? Natraga mahakna hingiba kuyom aduda pelakatadana, madugi mathakta kuyom amaaumuk yomsanabanha hotnaribara? (What is that we are perusing in life? Is it an effort to make our children and grandchildren happy? Or is it an effort to build an outer niche to make one's life more comfortable in as much as the present niche that one is living is dissatisfaction?

Today's lecture is about this *Hingnanabagi Kuyom*, the niche that is necessary to sustain life – a life with dignity. It is not about a privileged few to build a more and more comfortable niche to satisfy their greed, but it is for a journey pursuing the vision of a world where the basic human rights and fundamental freedom of everyone are realized. Today the United Nations may have developed an elaborate niche for the promotion and protection of human rights. But the question is how much of its implementation-mechanism can we in Manipur leverage to dismantle the oppressive structure that is crippling our lives and violating our basic human rights?

UNITED NATIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The United Nations is not a gift of God for world peace. It is rather a product of history and politics. It is

the direct outcome of the worst-ever-brutality that human beings have inflicted on other human beings, i.e. the World War II. The emergence of human rights was made possible by the people who dared to dream differently even in the midst of this war of brutality and genocide. They could draw the best of human spirit and generate a moral force to fight the "Axis of Evils". At the end of the war, those visionaries did not give up to harness the same moral forces to ensure the leaders kept up their promises to put human rights as one of the central themes of the international organization built after the war. Today we have an elaborate frame-work of international human rights standard which is unprecedented in human history. But a major challenge still hangs on in implementation of these standards.

Manipur, with its peculiar position in history and the unfolding geo-politics of Asia makes an interesting case to look at. After all, Manipur was a key battleground between the Allied and Axis forces. It suffered the devastation of World War II. Therefore, it deserves to enjoy the fruits of peace and to participate in the global march for human rights and freedom.

Atlantic Charter

Manipur must have received the first waves of refugees fleeing from the Japanese invasion in Burma, when in August 1941, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Wilson Churchill rendezvoused at sea, off the coast of Newfoundland at Placentia Bay, to lay out "their hope for the world". They signed a document, which later came to be known as the Atlantic Charter, promising "the right of people to choose the form of government under which they will live", and wanted people everywhere to "live out their lives in freedom from want and fear". It was a time when the whole of continental Europe was in the hands of the Axis, and Japan was rapidly expanding its territorial hold in Asia. The Allied leaders were pronouncing the Atlantic Charter, perhaps, to demonstrate a sharp contrast from the racist pogrom and territorial aggrandizement of the Axis. But in doing so they had inevitably invoked much hope amongst not only the colonized people of Asia and Africa but also the Europeans under the Fascist regime.

In order to hold out hope and to mobilize all resources necessary to mount a people's war against the Axis, 26 nations signed the "Declaration of the United Nations" on 1st January, 1942 "to preserve human rights and justice in their own land as well as in other lands".

World War II demonstrated, as never before in history, the extreme consequences of the doctrine of national sovereignty and ideologies of superiority. On the other hand, the counter narrative of equality of all human beings and human rights emerged with equal vigour. Even individual visionaries such as H.G. Wells, president of PEN International, launched a vigorous campaign to bring human rights to the attention of the public during the war. He drafted the "Declaration of Rights" and wrote a book, *The Rights of Man or What We Are Fighting For*? His pamphlets were even dropped behind the enemy lines.

In fact the war turned out to be as much a battle ground for ideas and values as it was for the warriors and weapons.

However, power being what it is, by the time the tide of the war

turned and the Allied powers were in an advantageous position, the same leaders who once spoke eloquently about human rights, quickly shifted their tone and tenor. Atlantic Charter and "Declaration on the United Nations" were considered to represent only goals rather than legal agreements that could jeopardise national interest or national sovereignty. It is in this context that Churchill made his celebrated statement about "not allowing stated principles such as that of right to self-determination to precipitate the liquidation of the British Empire", and described Atlantic Charter as "no more than a simple, rough and ready, war-time statement of goal" towards which the supporting governments "mean to make their war" instead of binging treaty with firm commitments.

Dumbarton Oaks Proposal

Representatives of United States, Britain, Soviet Union and China secretly met for seven weeks from August to October 1944, at the elegant colonial residence of Dumbarton Oaks at the outskirts of Washington DC to draft the charter of the organization that would come to be known as the United Nations. Despite all the solemn declarations, moving speeches, crusading rhetoric, leaders of the Great Powers were extremely cautious of granting the new organization authority to enforce rights that might interfere with their sovereignty. Ironically, it was only China which was willing "to cede as much of its sovereign power as may be required" to enable the international organization to enforce justice for the world. Despite China's strong plea the word "racial equality" was totally eliminated and human rights was mentioned only in reference to social and economic cooperation in the final draft.

India also protested that no provision appeared regarding the right of self-determination or racial equality, and Gandhi and his many followers escalated their call for independence. In November 1944 Australia and New Zealand met at Wellington and pressed for more role of the small and medium sized nations and an explicit mention of human rights in the Charter. Similarly in February 1945, 20 nations of Latin America met at the Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City to correct the fundamental defects of the Dumbarton Oak proposal by returning to "the great and humanitarian principles" of Atlantic Charter, promote respect for the rights of people and fundamental freedom, and make provision for the self-determination of the colonies and protection of the rights of their inhabitants. The yearning for a people's peace following the victory of a people's was palpable.

UN Charter

A spirit of extra-ordinary euphoria and sense of responsibility prevailed when the delegations of 50 nations gathered for the United Nations Conference on International Organization in the elegant setting of the San Francisco Opera House in April 1945. When the discussion on human rights came about Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit of India was quick to move an amendment that the new organization should promote "fundamental human rights for all men and women, irrespective of race, color, or creed, in all nations and in international relations and associations of nations with one another".

Exactly two months later on 26th June 1945 the United Nations Charter was opened for signature. Wellington Koo of China was the first to put his signature. Others followed suit. The United Nations was born and Human Right was firmly planted at the very heart of the Charter. The opening lines of the Charter read:

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED:

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...

HAVE RESOLVED TO COMBINE OUR EFFORTS TO ACCOMPLISH THESE AIMS

The text then carried this resolve directly into Article 1 where the signatories boldly pledge themselves and their organization to very new international responsibilities:

To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures for international peace;

To achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character; and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and fundamental freedom for all without distinction as to race, sex, language...

The Charter gave a big boost to all the discriminated and oppressed peoples struggling for their self-determination across the world. But did this historic event impact the people of Manipur? Probably, when these momentous events were taking place at the other end of the world, the inhabitants of Imphal must have just returned home from the countryside where they had been taking shelter after fleeing from their homes to escape the Japanese bombings. Manipur must have been just limping back to normalcy after going through the most violent experience in its history. The whole society was probably too caught up with the immediate crisis at hand that none of the leaders of that time would find the mind space to think of staking their national claim in the newly emerging world body.

In the first session of the UN General Assembly, 1946, India was very active. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit forcefully moved a resolution accusing the government of South Africa for its policies of grossly violating the basic human rights of Indians and others with darker skin colors, in total contradiction of the principles and purpose of the Charter. This invoked immediate and violent reaction from the South Africa delegation and Mr. Jan Smuts shouted back that his country is protected by article 2(7) of the Charter. The treatment of Indians, coloured, and mixed race, he said, was purely and simply a matter of domestic jurisdiction. He ominously warned that if UN were allowed to intervene in South Africa, it would set a dangerous precedent and would destroy national sovereignty. To this Pandit rose again and dismissed the legal argument about domestic jurisdiction as being "late in the day and far-fetched" and made a mockery of the principles enunciated in the Charter. A hot debate was generated. It marked a revolutionary departure and a clear signal to all governments that the UN will no longer be silent on gross human rights violation or be swayed by the traditional argument that how a nation treat its own people was somehow exclusively its own business.

(To be contd.)