

Ka Suk Ka Sain

An Examination of Peace Process in Khasi Context

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Peace is something that everyone seems to want, but difficult to achieve. Various attempts have been made at various levels throughout the globe to bring about peace or to make the globe a peaceful one. But it seems as if the more we try, the more it slips our way. People therefore 'pray for peace' today which, we could say is the only solution, where God can resolve peace on earth as many religions believe. But I am not entering into this kind of solution for I still consider the fact that peace is something that can be achieved provided that people really want it.

Peace is defined as the absence of war or other hostilities and conflicts. Peace is generally translated in Khasi as "Ka jingsuk" — "Ka jingsuk-pyrthei bym don thma don ktien."¹ This signifies a situation where there is no war no conflict in the whole situation. It can also be referred to as 'Ka Suk Ka Sain' — where there is peace and tranquility in all respects, whether in social life or political life, or even at personal life etc. 'Suk' here, means peace and 'Sain' means more or less, "formation" or 'making of'. Since peace here is mostly related to socio-political aspects of man's activity, therefore 'Ka Suk Ka Sain' also will have its primary bearing on this aspect of human activity. This, of course does not mean that it does not have any relation to other aspects of human activity. Since we are concentrating on peace as having mainly to

do with the socio-political aspect of human activity, hence I intend to discuss the above phrase only within that particular aspect. In this respect, one has to look into the meaning of the term 'Sain', for this term has special connotations. Since it is understood as formation or the process of making, we use the phrase *saindur* meaning to form a state or legislate or how to formulate a state or society which will be congenial for living. Therefore 'ka suk ka sain' implies that in the process of formation or transformation or even governance of the society as a whole, peace should prevail, there should not be any conflict or uneasiness, violence etc. The whole aspect of human social political relation should prevail in its orderly form. In other words, we can say that in the process of making the society which involves social and political activities, peace should prevail, and it should be one of the objectives. It therefore becomes the ideal of a society or even the State which has to be followed if a society were to flourish.

Talking about peace process would imply that either we have already presumed or experienced conflict or we presume its possible occurrence. But in any case, conflict and hostility can become like wild fire such that if we are not careful enough it might spread everywhere and become more destructive. They are also like diseases which can bring about fatal consequences. We are therefore to find the cause just like a doctor diagnoses the cause of a particular disease to cure it. In the same way the cause of conflict or hostility or violence has to be 'diagnosed' and look for the solution rather than suppressing it. Suppression can only multiply it, or it can resort to postponement of the course or can give only temporary cure without destroying the roots. Therefore while talking about peace process it is necessary as far as possible to cure the 'disease' rather than suppress it. This can be done by diagnosing the cause of the problems and by finding out a proper solution to it which can bring about long lasting peace and harmony. This of course will involve an ongoing process and needs cautions. How far it is possible is another question, for it may not be always possible to find out the root cause, especially in the present world where things have become so complicated and ever changing.

Talking about peace process in Meghalaya and especially in the Khasi context, I would like to mention few things. Firstly, I always believe that human beings are not born cruel. Circumstances

make them to be so. Circumstances can be of various kinds — physical, mental, social, political, economic etc. Though human being struggle for survival, yet unlike animals they live together in the society sharing with others and at the same time know their rights and duties. Human beings therefore learn to live peacefully in the midst of others and even with the environment. Secondly traditions also have some role to play in trying to find out the cause of conflict, and also to give some possible solutions. Legends and folklores which the Khasis cherish, tell us that the 'Golden Era' or Aiom Ksiar, was an era of peace and harmony in the universe when human beings and beast spoke the same language. It was the primeval social condition when God first created the world. But due to sinfulness of man, this era came to an abrupt end. The Aiom Ksiar was an era where righteousness or Ka Hok reigns supreme.² Due to sinfulness of human beings or Ka Pap, the Aiom Ksiar fell. Sinfulness as it appeared again in many folktales and legends were due to arrogance, selfishness and pride etc. This could be the intention of the Devil that human beings fall into his trap or as Primrose Gatphoh maintains that Ka pap begins with a small seed in the heart of man and develops gradually and spreads from one heart to another. As a result "the virtues have faded while vice is becoming supreme by casting gloom in society. Man learnt the departure of peace.... An inner man is deprived (of peace) while another loses his manly charm."³ The fall of the Aiom Ksiar also signifies that human beings have lost their relationship with the creator, which also signifies the loss of the sense of morality, or the deterioration of morality itself, for morality centres within religion itself. Morality centres on the principles like "to earn righteousness, (Ban kamai ia ka hok) to know man and know God (Ban tip brierw tip Blei) and to know one's own maternal and paternal relation (Ban tip kur tip kha)." These are the three commandments. God gave to the Hynnriew Trep or to the Khasis. They also form the three tenets of Khasi Religion. In this way as Barnes Mawrie says, "Khasi ethics is a deeply religious ethics,"⁴ it is true that religious conviction determines moral conviction to a large extent. Righteousness is the primary virtue which everyone strives to cultivate, which is also the commandment of God.

But due to various reasons, it has led to the fall of the Golden Era — that is, human beings no longer care to adhere seriously to

the moral principles. In the process of the struggle for his own survival the self-interest or egoistic nature of the human tends to triumph over their 'other-regarding drives'. Human's concern for self-interest is more intense than the concern for other's interest. What might evolve as a serious consequence is that when human concentrates too much on his or her interest only he or she might forget the others as equally important. We find in the legends and folktales about how arrogance, jealousy, selfishness etc. come to dominate the mindset of human. (*Sier Lapalang, Manik Raitong, Symper Nongsynrih and u Symper Kmawan, Ka Masi bad ka Tyngab, Krem Lamet Krem Latang* and many other tales.)

Looking at today's society as Barnes Mawrie says we see that it is deeply engrossed in materialism and therefore moral values are beginning to lose importance. But he maintained that 'Ka hok' (i.e. righteousness) still has its ground. He also argues that the spirit of personal freedom has brought about degeneration in the moral life of the Khasis. Due to this perhaps humans concentrate more on individualistic goals and not so much on what he or she ought to do. What would be more serious is that, for the sake of achieving one's target, people might take the name of the community. This takes place especially when the individual fails to achieve his or her goal individually. There can be no lack of such instances in our country and also in our society. This sort of thing may evolve in some sort of groupism, whose interest, we can say, is mainly individualistic or singularly that of the group. But I don't mean to say that this is always bad or not appreciated. It will tend to be bad or wrong if it is determined by wrong/bad motives and the means which might be detrimental to the society, or exploit other's rights and privileges. Humans no doubt enjoy their freedom, but at the same time they should remember that they live in the society or they are member of the 'kingdom of ends' as Kant holds.

Another factor, I would like to mention here is that, as tradition tells us, Ri khasi is the 'ka Ri Umsnam u Ni U Kong' (The land where the ancestors had shed their blood). For the sake of the Ri Khasi the whole citizen rose to protect their land ('Ka Ri Umsnam' J.S. Shangpliang, 1993). If we go by the tradition, conflict was there even at the time of its formation and it became an ongoing process for quite a number of decade. "(...) Khasis with chiefs and people were worried by the manner in which the British had began entrenching themselves that with the arrival of

the soldiers and convicts from Assam and Sylhet to construct the road through the hills (...) All these created a fear psychosis amongst the hillmen, the expression of which was to involve practically all the Khasi states in a serious and protected resistance to British rule."⁵ Even before the coming of the British Administration at Sylhet in 1765, the Khasi had fought many battles with the Mongols. Many encroachments took place by the plain people, hence the Khasi pledged to maintain a collective defense to fight till every intruder was driven out of their land."⁶ History also tells us that on a number of occasions, the Khasis were victims of Sylhet traders.

Due to this reason, and especially with all the incidents that have taken place in the past, the Khasis perhaps had learned some lessons. The lesson they might have learned was that 'foreigners' are not to be trusted. Moreover 'foreigners' (Mynder) have only come to exploit us and their interests are only for their own benefits. Therefore as it appears in many patriotic poems or novels etc. the ancestors have warned the people of Khasi to be careful not to allow to any outsiders or 'foreigners' to dominate, subjugate or exploit the 'Ri Khasi'. Perhaps due to this that many Khasis even today have not given up this kind of suspicion. The lesson that the ancestors have learned is conveyed through to the generations. But this does not mean that for the Khasis the others are always enemies. But experiences have taught them as far as relationship with 'others' are concerned, even after Independence people still feel that they have been deprived of their rights especially when the new system of government was introduced. The government (both state and central) instead of looking after the interest of the people and the society, it rather causes insecurity, multiplies problems, confusions, etc.

Taking both these factors into consideration, we find that conflict has its root-cause which comes to favour even in the modern Khasi society. It is this root-cause which has to be 'cured' rather than suppressed. However this will involve an ongoing process, a rigorous effort and understanding. Going by the former, we can say that each individual has his or her own self interest. Since people's interests and wants are unlimited, therefore the tendency is that they will always concern about their own individualistic interest. "Frequently, of course, it is not easy enough to see that a politician's pronouncements and actions — although

clothed in terms of interest of the people or the nation are really — and quite obviously, in the interest of the politician's personal ambitions."⁶ For the sake of one's own interest or benefit many people use various means or ways like many politicians did. Some even take the name of the community to intensify the matter. How best can we understand if it is true, that some politicians used militants or even undergrounds to win elections? What about the other section of the people? As I have said earlier, groupism arises out of the individual's failure to achieve certain stipulated goals. Here, one has to be careful as not to get into the trap of illicit generalization for groupism, as it is not something bad in itself. In fact only some "exploitative groups" are bad. This kind of group uses the name of society or community as a tool to achieve their goals which in due course tries to create an issue where the whole community will be involved or affected. The groups again, or sections of people for the sake of their 'confused' goal, when they fail to achieve the same they indulged in various things like confrontation with the government or administration, trying to take the law in their hands etc. This, in the process gives birth to conflict, violence etc.

Coming to another factor, the people, especially the youth of Khasi hills today demand protection of the Ri Khasi from being swallowed away by outsiders. "A minority like Khasis feel more weakened by the entry of people from outside because non-tribal have traditionally controlled the economic forces in their land."⁷ Due to this reason, the youth feel threatened that others or 'foreigners' might one day swallow them. Hence their sentiment was not to allow this kind of things to happen as their ancestors did in the past. Due to this many kinds of confrontations, anti-tribal programmes were witnessed by various youth organizations. In this context when the government tries to protect the 'other' or outsiders or show any interest in protecting their rights and interest become a culprit. Due to this, many events have been experienced in the past. And in many cases due to the incapability of the government to look into the matter tactfully things sometimes became aggravated. This also happen possibly because the government failed to identify the problem in time and sort out a solution.

In both these cases, the government as well as the community as a whole has to play a decisive role. First of all one can say that

the government has a commanding role to play. But due to some factors like inefficiency, compulsion, negligence etc. the government has to experience failure. The failure of the government to perform its duty properly creates a lot of uneasiness and suspicion in the minds of the people. In fact many problems crop up like unemployment, corruption, despotism, frustration, partiality, aggression etc. which further leads to serious consequences. We learned from the confessions of many activists like HNLC that the reason why they decided to go underground was due to frustration and anger brought about by the adamant attitude of the government to attend to their problems. Frustration, they said was due to unemployment, exploitation and other things of that sort. The policy adopted by the government was also not favourable to the people, or as they expected them to be treated. This also created a kind of dissent and suspicion amongst the natives. Moreover the government, in handling the situation acted in such a way that will lead only the symptoms i.e. by trying to suppress it. For example one can ask whether 'peace-keeping force' will have any meaning in peace process, or the Special Operation Tiger (SOT) can really heal the 'disease' or can restore peace. This sounds paradoxical in the sense that it can also add fuel to the fire.

It may also happen that instead of allowing the government to execute any proper action or think of any strategic move, people try to take the matter in their hands. We experienced strikes, protests, bandhs etc. which some people or some group of people tried to organize in order to pressurize the government to conform to some of their demands etc. In such a situation when the government failed to handle the matter tactfully it leads to serious consequence, as we have experienced. This, in the process creates a distance where what the people think and what the government does do not converge. For instance the people might think that what the government does is something wrong, or something which will cause threats and dangers to the society, but might not be always true. This we can say is misunderstanding each other. It cannot also be denied that from the part of the government perhaps due to some reasons failed to pay any proper attention to the matter. As a result conflict, confrontation and things of that sort occurred. For example the youth resented over the attitude of the government to protect the interest of the people and ethno-cultural identity. On top of everything" "their anger

towards the establishment is intensified as they perceive both the political leaders and the bureaucracy as corrupt and selfish."⁸ The youth of Meghalaya in general and of Shillong in particular, as Patrica Mukhim observes, perceive a measure of isolation, obsolescence, decadence, corruption ineptitude and irresponsibility amongst the political leaders and administrators of the state.⁹

What I want to say, therefore, is that the causes of conflict in the Khasi context can be understood by taking into consideration the traditional account as well as historical account besides the socio-political and economic conditions prevailing in the society as a whole at some point of time. In short, it is not adequate to concentrate only on the recent or even present conditions. The present also has some relations with the past, though in a minimal form. Hence any solution to this would not take place over night. It will, no doubt, involve an ongoing process and effort. Sometimes it will become almost impossible. Just like it takes time to change the habit or character of human, it will also be quite reasonable to say that peace process is an ongoing process which might involve many factors.

A state of peace would mean a state where human is integrated with himself/herself and with other fellow beings. Though human, as J.S. Mill, says is egoistic in nature, yet human thinks about the interest of the society in which he or she lives. In so far as the fulfillment of a human's life consists in integrity rather than fragmentation, this can happen only in and through one's relationship with other human beings. Man's egoistic interest should be transferred into altruistic interest as well. In this regard religion, morality and tradition can play a decisive role. In Khasi social traditions, social norms like 'kamai ia ka hok' i.e. earn righteousness ; 'Tip briew tip blei' i.e. to know men and God; 'tip kur tip kha' i, e to know one's own relations from both mother and father's side are the best guiding principles. Human should earn righteousness in thought, words, deeds, occupation, services, earnings etc. Man should not indulge in any unfair practices like corruption, cheating etc. In addition to this man should respect his or her fellow human beings, the 'Kur' and the 'Kha'. This follows from the fact like 'how do you love God who is not seen without loving your neighbours?' Similarly, how do we know God without knowing men? Knowing men implies knowing my fellow-humans, respecting them and caring for them as we care

for ourselves. Even Jesus Christ commands us to love our neighbour. We should also love our enemy as well. This reminds us that we should not think about ourselves only. We should also love and respect others as well. What I mean to say is that in Khasi society, religion, traditional practices, customs play a vital role as far as peace process is concerned.

In the traditional Khasi society peace or 'ka suk ka sain' was to prevail in every sphere of human activity and everywhere. Right from the family level the executive uncle (*mama*) tries to maintain peace and harmony. In this way right from their childhood the parents attempt to bring up their children in a way so that they may learn to live in perfect harmony with their fellow beings as well as in unison with God. Since every family wants peace therefore if any problem arises, it is the duty of the uncle and all the members to set things right through the process of co-operation, mutual understanding and respect. This same process was also followed at the community level where the chieftain (Syiem) together with his *Myntiris*, *Lyngdoh* and *Basans* played a prominent role. When the uncle or 'kur' failed to resolve any dispute, if any, they will refer it to the 'durbar' consisting of elders. Can we apply the phrase 'ka suk ka sain' in the present context of peace process? This phrase though not an exhaustive one, signifies the state where peace prevailed in every aspect of human life and activities. It signifies a situation where there is no conflict, no tension, no hatred, no violence, no war, jealousy, and so on. It is a state where human is integrated with himself/herself and with his fellow beings. I would say that it is a state where morality reigns. But what happens today is just the opposite. First of all, humans today are more concerned about their own respective interests and goals. Therefore human is in conflict with himself as well as with his/her fellow humans. Secondly, today we live in the midst of 'others' or 'outsiders'. What could be our attitude towards the 'other'? Most of the time we become suspicious of others — that others are threats to our ethno-cultural-identity, threat to our economy and so on. Thirdly, the present system of governance and administration has created some sort of uneasiness, suspicions and even invites partiality, desperation, confusion, exploitation etc.

'Ka suk ka sain' can make a true sense here, not just through destructive strategy like 'peace keeping force' or competition etc.

What I feel is that we should revive our sense of being ethical. This can be done by adhering to our 'old' but 'powerful' traditional system of morality which is centred in the 'ka Hok' or righteousness. Why should we consider our own system of morality as something obsolete or non-significant? This system of morality does not purport any theory or special kind of judgments as we have in other traditions. Rather we can say that our system of morality is, as Barnes Mawrie says is a kind of narrative ethics which demonstrates clearly that moral objectivity and truth are inseparable from the stories, character, attitudes and orientation of the moral agent. In order that peace should prevail, if not in totality, the Khasis should adhere to this great commandment *kamai ia ka hok* (earn righteousness). A Khasi, as they said, before he or she does any action, questions himself or herself whether it is just or right to do so. If it is right, it is worth doing and if it is not so, one should refrain from doing it. "If any ethics is primarily to help a person to live a just and righteous life with himself/ herself and in relation to others, Khasi ethics too is similarly oriented towards a righteous life. The personal and social life of every Khasi is permeated by a great sense of righteousness."¹⁰ This is also evidenced from the fact that 'tip kur tip kha' makes Khasi ethics highly altruistic which concerns about the welfare of others as well. Welfare is simultaneously epistemological and ethical. In such a situation where humans are concentrating too much on materialistic and utilitarian values, morality should play a decisive role both at the individual and communal level.

Coming to the second problem where we live in the midst of 'other', the question can be asked like 'are others a threat to me and to my community?' Today we cannot isolate ourselves from the 'other' and vice versa. There might be some elements in 'other' which we might consider as causing threat to us. But I think it is wrong to make a generalization that 'others' are always a threat to us. What we have in our minds is that the sense of 'suspicion' that others are always others. Suspicion is a state of mind where we cannot arrive at any certainty. To suspect is more or less to doubt the authenticity or the truth itself. I can suspect that a winning candidate might have bribed the people because I have no evidence of its truth or falsehood. If I can furnish the evidence, then it becomes the truth. On the other hand, if I cannot, it becomes false. But in most cases suspicion does not admit of any

direct proof or justification for it is so complicated and does not seem to admit any foundational framework for justification. A man may suspect that so and so is the case because he does not understand the case. Or it may be because after having understood it, she felt that it should not have been so. Or it may be because the case opens room for doubt. Similarly a person who is conditioned by *some other factors* might entertain this kind of idea or state of mind.

We normally suspect others as threat to us. But this cannot be justified simply by basing on certain unconfirmed evidences like experiences that would not be adequate. Whatever the case might be, 'suspicion' can not give us the truth, for if the suspicion is proved to be true then it ceases to be so. Hence suspicion will either make people to find the truth or act as a hindrance to the truth, if not properly articulated. Suspicion will only bring about uncertainty and confusion which hinders any meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding in the context of social life. Coming to the third problem, what is to be done on the part of government is to ensure transparency, responsibility, humanitarianism and accountability. The government with all its machineries should strive at bringing about development in all aspects of life as far as possible to ensure peace and prosperity. All policies and programmes should be humanitarian and it should generate a sense of mutual trust and respect. Culprits should be penalized and justice should prevail. This again demands efficiency and tactfulness on the part of the government. People's representatives and bureaucrats should be honest, faithful and moral. But in many occasions suspicion, misunderstanding, confusion, ignorance and narrow-mindedness should be resolved.

The simple formula for peace as Ramond Munoz says is understanding and respect. Understanding involves knowing and being tolerant of another's viewpoint; and respect is the willingness to show consideration and appreciation for the beliefs of others. This can be carried out through a dialogue where conflicting parties can share and present their view point or interest. Even Bobby Marwein, the Commander-in-chief of the HNLC outfit said that peace would come through negotiation and not through surrender (*The Shillong Times*, 5-11-05). In this way one has to have an open mind free from all prejudices, suspicion, partiality and subjectivism. Rather one should effectively engage himself or

herself in the moral discourse to respect. Others should be treated as fellow humans in spite of differences. John Macquarie (*The Concept of Peace*, 1973) maintains that when people can talk to each other even about them, there is often remarkable progress towards a fair resolution of conflict. But when communication has broken down, peace has been made inaccessible. But genuine dialogue, according to *Buber*, takes place when each of the partners, even when he or she stands in opposition to each other heeds, affirms and confirms his opponent as an existing other, only then can conflict be eliminated from the world and humanly arbitrated and can be led towards its overcoming. Dialogue again should involve mutual respect and activation or implementation and not just a strategy or theory without practice. Further, without understanding and respect we have nothing but a world full of intolerant individuals each concerned only with their own beliefs and ideals. 'Ka Suk ka Sain' will prevail, if not fully, only when there is mutual understanding, respect, when human understand his or her rights and duties properly as a member of 'kingdom of ends' or when each and every individual follows the principle of ka HOK. The ka HOK gives ethical sanctification to the ideally intuited given form of the community.

NOTES

1. *English Khasi Dictionary*, by U. Nissor Singh, Mittal Publication, 2000, New Delhi.
2. Jespil Syiem, *Ka Thymmei U Hynniew Trep 'Ki Saw Dubar Blei'*, Seng Kyrsei, 2005.
3. Hamlet Bareh, *A short History of Khasi Literature*, Shillong 1969, p. 63.
4. Barnes Mawrie, *An Introduction to Khasi Ethics*, DBCIC Publication, Shillong, 2005.
5. David Syiemlieh, *Two perception of U Tirot Sing Syngkhong Jingtup-2*, Khasi Author's Society, Shillong, 1989, p. 11.
6. E.W. Dkhar, *Economic Structure During Tirot Sing's Times'*, Souvenir, Celebration of 150th Death Aniversary of U Tirot Sing, Khasi Cultural Society, 1984, Shillong, p. 4.
7. Mrinal Miri, *Identity and the Moral Life*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003, p. 106.
8. Patricia Mukhim, "Conflict and its Resolution" in M.M. Agrawal (ed.) *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North East India*, Indus Publishing Company, 1996, New Delhi, p. 30.
9. Patricia Mukhim, *ibid.*, p. 31.
10. Barnes Mawrie, *op cit.* p. 97.