



The Sangai Express

I tried to drown my sorrows, but the bastards learned how to swim, and now I am overwhelmed by this decent and good feeling.
Frida Kahlo

Less than 20 days for Yaoshang to come, but... The virus is still out there

It is still some days away, less than 20 days to be more precise and this is perhaps where the collective discipline of the people will be put to test. It did not impact on the people's behaviour last year for Yaoshang festival came before Manipur reported her first COVID-19 case on March 24 and the important and interesting question is whether this year should be any different from the previous years. The virus that causes COVID-19 continues to spread, though its spread has now come down to single digit spikes per day, which should underline the point that the virus is still out there and can infect anyone who has had the misfortune of coming into contact with it. Perhaps it would be prudent for Manipur to recall the days when Manipur reported her first COVID-19 case. So it was that from the devil may care attitude before March 24, to the sudden emergence of several *leikai* heroes and heroines who took it upon themselves to impose *curfew hours* and put up road blocks at their respective *leikais* to back to square one again with no one seeming to care that the virus is still out there. The same devil may care attitude is most likely to be carried into the Yaoshang festival, for the people of Manipur, more particularly the Meiteis are known not to lose any opportunity to celebrate a festival or two, never mind that coronavirus has claimed 373 lives in Manipur till date. This is where local clubs and community based CSOs need to come forward and take steps to ensure that celebrating the festival does not go overboard, for what is at stake here is the health and wellbeing of the people. This word of caution is all that more important as some States, particularly Maharashtra is in the grip of a second wave and there is no guarantee that Manipur will not see such a similar condition.

Recall the days of lockdown, the restrictions placed on the movement of people and the call to avoid large crowds and to maintain social distancing. A look at the roads of Imphal today would leave no one in doubt that caution has been thrown to the wind and the behaviour of the people is bound to make one come under the illusion that the virus will not rear its ugly head again. There is a reason why a good number of knowledgeable people have been talking about the danger of a second wave and though the infection rate has come down considerably, no one should forget that the virus is still out there and infecting people at will. The point is, no one can afford to let their guards down. Time for all to come to terms with the call for the New Normal. Maintain social distancing, wear a face mask whenever one steps out, avoid large crowd or overcrowding, wash one's hand regularly with soap and water or with a hand sanitiser. These few lines should be the guidelines for everyone and there is no way one should let one's guards down. Let Yaoshang come, but celebrate it with a sense of responsibility. Let elders of each family, *leikai* clubs and voluntary organisations take the lead in maintaining a sense of order while taking part in the celebration. The time calls for maintaining discipline in the public fora and this will make the celebration of arguably the biggest festival of the Meiteis all that more meaningful.

Etc Etc

Instead of reducing maximum speed limit, Thailand increases it to 120 kph

Bobby Ramakant – CNS

Contd from previous issue

Think about this: roads must become safer and convenient not just for motorised vehicle riders, but for everyone as each one of us has a human right to commute safely—such as those who walk, cycle, do vending on roadsides, or opt for non-motorised vehicles. Moreover, it is not only those who ride motorised vehicles but also those who cycle, walk or use other forms of transport or engage in roadside vending or other activities, who get injured or die untimely in these crashes.

According to the 2020 review of the World Health Organization (WHO), “each day, for almost 60 people in Thailand, travel from their homes is a journey of no return. Most of these are young people, people of working age—in the prime of their lives. Most use motorcycles, the most common vehicle on Thailand's roads. Most die in crashes with larger vehicles.” This review further added “Motorcycle riders, cyclists, pedestrians and those who have physical limitations, such as people with disabilities, children and older persons are relatively unprotected and, therefore, more vulnerable to serious injury and death.”

The WHO review noted that “Each year, more than 20,000 Thai people die from road crashes and many others are seriously injured and become permanently disabled. During 2011-2013, the annual average economic loss resulted from the road traffic trauma of the country was 545,435 million Thai baht, representing 6% of the national GDP (TDRI 2017).”

REDUCED TRAFFIC AND SPEED HELPS MAKE ROADS SAFER

If there are stronger public transport system, which are comfortable, affordable, and accessible to all – rich and poor alike – then private vehicle ownership will lose relevance. On the contrary, if we do not have strong public transport systems then people will be forced to buy/ rent/ share and use private vehicles. (To be contd)

Fear is the glue that holds Myanmar's military together

Bertil Lintner

Demonstrations against the Feb. 1 military coup in Myanmar have continued for more than a month. Brutal and even lethal force against the pro-democracy demonstrators may have reduced the number of people who are risking their lives by taking to the street, but there is nothing to indicate that protests against the re-introduction of a naked military dictatorship will cease any time soon. But what has stunned the world most is the violence that Myanmar's army and police have unleashed on the population at large.

More than fifty people have died, scores have gunshot wounds and more than a thousand protesters—along with some people the military simply thought would be sympathetic to the protesters—have been arrested. Even prominent business tycoons and bankers suspected of having provided monetary support to the National League for Democracy (NLD), which led the ousted Government, were detained briefly and interrogated by Myanmar's secret police, *sa ya pa*, the Bamar abbreviation for “the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs.”

More than a third of those killed were teenagers who had been shot by a single bullet to the head, indicating that small snipers have been active among the security forces. Video clips show soldiers stopping an ambulance clearly marked as such with a red cross, then dragging the medics out of it and beating them senseless. According to several reports from the

country's largest city Yangon, uniformed men have ordered medics not to treat wounded demonstrators. In Yangon as well, a man was seen being shot by the police—after he had been apprehended. In the central city of Mandalay, video footage shows a soldier firing his rifle into a hospital.

A teenage boy in Kale was shot and killed because he had flashed the three-finger sign to a group of soldiers. In North Okkalapa, a Yangon suburb, automatic rifle fire, as opposed to single shots, could be heard when the military tried to suppress a protest there on March 3. And, as the Irrawaddy reported on March 2, a pregnant woman was beaten and her home looted when policemen and soldiers went on a rampage in the southeastern town of Myeik. They destroyed furniture and stole an ATM card and 400,000 kyats in cash. In other places policemen and soldiers have smashed people's motorcycles and cars.

The list of atrocities committed against the protesters and others could be made much longer, but the question many are asking now is how the military leadership can get its soldiers and policemen to commit such violent acts apparently without hesitation?

Why would only small groups of policemen have had the courage to refuse to obey their superiors when no soldier would do the same?

The myth perpetuated by the country's ruling junta—and some Western academics and half-baked analysts—is that the country would fall

apart if the military were not in power. The armed forces are the “glue,” as one Western academic put it, that keeps the ethnically diverse country together.

The coup and its aftermath should have put an end to whatever remained of such fairy tales among the general public. A much stronger factor than the supposed “patriotism” of the military is the fact that since it first seized power in 1962 it has evolved into a privileged State-within-a State, where perks, privileges and power over the country's economy are phenomena that they don't want to give up and are prepared to do anything—no matter how brutal—to crush those opposed to their rule.

There is also another reason the military refuses to give up any of its powers, or even reduce those to acceptable levels as the NLD-led Government tried to do during 2016-2021. And that is fear.

That, more than anything else, is the “glue” that keeps the armed forces united. A relatively weak officer like the Commander-in-Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, probably knows that he is either in power, in prison, in exile, or worse. The same goes for several other high-ranking officers, especially in view of what's happened since Feb. 1.

And what the urban population is experiencing now—murder, theft and the destruction of property—is what people living in the ethnic minority areas have been subjected to for decades, along with the burning of

villages and rape of young women.

It would be hard to find any army officer who has not taken part in such brutality, and they and many of their soldiers fear that they will have to face justice for crimes against humanity if the military relinquishes power.

While an all-out mutiny within the Myanmar army or a counter coup by disgruntled military officers are highly unlikely scenarios, there is another kind of fear that keeps to top leadership united: that a lone maverick, perhaps together with some comrades, might take a drastic, even desperate, step that would change the course of history.

In late 1963 Anglo-Bamar captain and aide-de-camp called Kyaw Swa Myint, known as Johnny Liars in English, saw how the economy of his country was deteriorating after the 1962 coup and the introduction of what was called “the Burmese Way to Socialism.” He tried to assassinate then military dictator, General Ne Win.

The attempt failed, but Kyaw Swa Myint managed to escape to Thailand then made his way to Australia where he refused to mix with other exiles, fearing that Ne Win had sent agents after him. His wife, mother and sisters were jailed and tortured. Following that incident all Anglo-Bamar were either dismissed or pushed sideways. Among the few who were allowed to stay although he actually was a friend of Kyaw Swa Myint's was the Sandhurst-trained officer David Abel, who became a

Minister in several Governments that were formed after the bloody crushing of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising.

In 1976, Ohn Kyaw Myint, a young army captain who had graduated with best cadet award in Batch 29, saw the misery the Nation had fallen into after 14 years of misrule. Together with some of his comrades he attempted to assassinate Ne Win, hoping for the fall of his Government. That failed as well. Ohn Kyaw Myint was sentenced to death and later executed. The others were purged and many classmates from OTS 29, who had had nothing to do with the plot, were sidelined. One of the witnesses at the trial of Ohn Kyaw Myint was a junior army officer called Than Shwe, who became Myanmar's military ruler in 1992 and remained in power until he eventually retired after the 2010 election.

It was in the wake of those two attempts on his life that Ne Win strengthened his military intelligence service and made it into his own Praetorian Guard. It became known throughout the country as *em-eye*. Although that institution has been reshaped and purged many times, its main objective is still what the old nickname suggests: to spy on the military in order to detect any sign of dissent within the officer corps. That remains the case in its most recent incarnation as *sa ya pa* today. Any challenge to a supreme authority has been out of the question and remains so today.

Nevertheless, it is hard to

imagine that change in Myanmar can come about without involvement by some men within the military, which has remained the country's most powerful institution since 1962. Exactly how that would happen is something not even Myanmar's famous fortunetellers and astrologers would dare to predict.

What can be said with certainty, though, is that Myanmar will not be the same after Min Aung Hlaing made his disastrous decision to launch a coup on Feb. 1. He and his henchmen provoked an entire Nation to rise up against his dictatorship in mass demonstrations never seen before, not even in 1988. Thanks to computer savvy youngsters, there is not an incident that goes unreported and transmitted to the outside world over the internet.

“You messed with the wrong generation” is a comment that has often been heard during the protests. And it is those talented young people who represent the future of Myanmar. Not some generals living in the past who think they can get away with anything.

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Courtesy The Irrawaddy

Mayasvi festival of the Tsou of Taiwan

Dr Budha Kamei

The Tsou ethnic group is one of the 14 (fourteen) recognized indigenous peoples of Taiwan. They speak a branch of Austronesian language, languages spoken by aboriginals in Australia and people in the south Pacific not the languages spoken by people in China or Southeast Asia. They are a people of both beauty and power, like the mountains of Alishan which they call home. They are also a people of age old traditions, many of which remain closely interwoven in the fabric of their life today. Their culture (from costume and customs to festivals and food) does continue to convey the spirit and passion of these early settlers of Alishan. In the distant past, they prospered throughout the central and southern parts of Taiwan, but war and epidemic greatly decreased their population to only 7000 people, concentrated on the southwest side of Yushan in Chiayi County. They are now divided into southern and northern groups: the southern group makes their home at the upper reaches of the Nanzhishan River in Sanmin township, Kaohsiung County and the northern group inhabits the upper reaches of the Zengwen River, the left bank of the Chenyuluan River, and the upper reaches of the Gingshwei River in Alishan Township, Chiayi County. The northern Tsou group is further divided into two sub-groups: the Tapangu (Dabang) and the Tfuya (Tefuye). Each group has kept some distinct characteristics in language and culture. In keeping their unique spiritual roots while consolidating the Tsou identity, they (three groups) have re-established their traditional ceremonies and celebrations. In a year, they perform three major celebrations with prayer for heaven's blessings, hoping that the God will grant them good fortune and prosperity and avert evil and disaster. This attitude applies to all aspects of society, from agriculture, war and hunting to architecture, religion and everyday life. The paper is a humble attempt to delve into the socio-cultural significance of the Mayasvi festival of the Tsou tribe of Taiwan.

A few days ahead of the festival, young men of the tribe under the guidance of old men start to organize sacred objects in the Kuba (meeting place for tribal males), maintaining the Kuba, and cleaning major roads of the tribe. Female members of the tribe prepare wine, sticky rice cakes etc. for the ceremony.

Mayasvi is the grandest annual celebration of the Alishan Tsou tribe. Traditionally, Mayasvi was celebrated upon the return of tribal warriors from war or a hunt, the building of a Kuba, or when the tribe did experience a major change or setback. For centuries, they celebrated the war festival to honor its Gods and warriors. Head hunting has long been banned by the Government. Today, they celebrate the festival to protect their cultural identity and it lasts for two days. The festival does bring together the male members of the tribe for two days of singing, rites of passage, and the blessing of newborn boys. In fact, the festival has compounded a number of rituals, with a very rich content, and deep meaning of praying for victory, prosperity and strengthening the tribe.

According to Chi Hao James Lo, “Mayasvi is notably the most important celebration of the indigenous Tsou people. Mayasvi is to the Tsou what Chinese New Year is to the Chinese, usually resulting in the celebration being mistaken for the Tsou equivalent of an indigenous harvest festival held in high esteem by other groups. This would be wrong, as the Tsou celebrate their harvest during Homeyaya, making Mayasvi more accurately translated as “Festival of War and Triumph,” celebrated by the Tsou to serve two purposes: To invite the Gods into their village to bless the people with prosperity and triumph, as well as a rite of passage for newborn baby boys to be recognized by the Gods.”

In Tsou tradition, the elders choose the date of the festival after the Homeyaya (harvesting festival) considering factors like hunting results (head hunting), whether the Kuba requires reconstruction and situations that affect the tribe such as natural disasters/other incidents. Due to factors like social environment and changes of tribal life, the Dabang and Tfuya villages hold the festival in rotation; now, the date of the festival falls on around in the middle of February every year.

Kuba is a sacred building of males. It can be seen in the patriarchy-oriented Tsou village and is surrounded by local houses. It is always built high above ground so that a constant fire symbolizing the Tsou's everlasting flourishing and passion be burnt in the center of the ground floor. Women are not allowed to enter and touch the Kuba. All important decisions are taken by a conjoint meeting of village males in the Kuba. Traditionally, old men of the tribe clean and repair the roof of the Kuba with the assistance of young men prior to Mayasvi festival. This does serve as a chance to pass age-old traditions as well as presenting a seldom found bonding opportunity between generations.

On the first day of Mayasvi, the warriors of the tribe will rise early, and put on their traditional attire in the Kuba. The tribe chief will lead the warriors downstairs to transfer the sacred fire that burns under the Kuba to a prepared open square located not far from the Kuba, where the fire will burn for two days before being extinguished; they gather near the Yono trees, a flora sacred to the Tsous. Then, a boar will be brought in front of the trees, and with an order from the elders, the male members/warriors will use knives to stab. Then, they will lift their knives stained with boar blood towards the tree leaves, and wipe the blood onto the sacred trees as a sacrifice for the God of war and the God of life. A few warriors will then climb up the sacred trees and repair the foliage.

The sacred trees serve as a stairway for the Tsou God of war and the Tsou God of life during the welcoming ceremony, so after cutting down the branches, three will be left, pointing towards the Kuba and the chief's home symbolizing a road cleared for the Gods. The Gods will eventually be led to the festival in the Kuba, where they will bless the village. Under the leadership of the elders, the crowd will hold hands into

a semi-circle formation, singing a solemn welcoming god tune. After singing, the men will go onto the Kuba, and the other members will run back to their houses and bring back other offerings like wine, sticky rice cake and boar meat. On their way, they will shout incessantly as a way to report to Gods and then come back to the Kuba for more rituals.

In the Kuba, the tribe elders mix up the wine, cakes and meat brought by the warriors together and then the mixture is distributed to every household symbolizing tribal unity. Just before that they will offer wine to the God of war for strength and unity. The most important ceremonies of the unity ritual are the Patkaya and Yasmoyuska—both are rite of passage for the boys in the Tsou culture. Patkaya introduces newborn boys of the tribe to the residing Gods in the Kuba. Usually, presented by a maternal uncle, a baby boy will be introduced to the Gods by surrounding warriors who will chant the Tsou victory scripture, the *Tu.e* followed by blessings from elders with wine. Then, teenage boys are brought into the Kuba, where they will be whipped with a vine and presented with their first leather hat from elders. The leader will then lead the now grown up men to the village chief to receive rice wine and encouragement to commemorate their rite of passage. This act symbolizes the passage from a teenager to an adult.

After the rituals in the Kuba, the warriors will walk into the square again, engaging in the sending off ceremony. Everyone will gather in front of the sacred trees again in a semi-circle, singing four songs. In the middle, female members of the tribe will also enter the formation with torches, signifying the unification with the tribal fire and the Kuba's sacred fire. At the end of the song, they will send off the Gods through the sacred trees back into the sky. Later on, they will perform a ceremonial cleansing of the village to purge from evils.

In the evening, the elders will lead the tribe members in a dance with all kind of songs, praising the God of war and the heroic deeds of their ancestors. Each clan will also praise and present gift each other, signifying their close ties. The festival usually lasts a period of two days, until the midnight of the last day. All the men attending will chant again their song of gratitude before putting out the fire in the square, which closes the celebration of Mayasvi festival.

In the distant past, inter-village war was a common occurrence among the tribal peoples. The warriors of the village at the cost of their lives defended the village from enemy's attacks. The practice of head hunting was gone. However, it is preserved in the form of narrative. The war rituals continue without the violence in the Mayasvi festival for prosperity, strength and victory. It protects and promotes the rich culture and traditions of the peoples. It may be treated as survival of culture. Young members also have the opportunity to learn the historic culture, social ethics and ancestor's wisdom through the process of the festival. Besides, festival serves as a reunion of family members, relatives, and friends.

Periodic, free and fair elections, a basic structure of the Constitution

Aaron Keishing

Contd from previous issue

Examining the underlying object of inserting Part IX-A by the Constitution (Seventy-fourth) Amendment Act, 1992 and highlighting effective and meaningful role to be played by local bodies in political governance of the country, K.G. Balakrishnan, J. (as His Lordship then was) stated:

“The object of introducing these provisions was that in many States the local bodies were not working properly and the timely elections were not being held and the nominated bodies were continuing for long periods. Elections had been irregular and many times unnecessarily delayed or postponed and the elected bodies had been superseded

or suspended without adequate justification at the whims and fancies of the State authorities. These views were expressed by the then Minister of State for Urban Development while introducing the Constitution Amendment Bill before the Parliament and thus the new provisions were added in the Constitution with a view to restore the rightful place in political governance for local bodies. It was considered necessary to provide a Constitutional status to such bodies and to ensure regular and fair conduct of elections. In the statement of objects and reasons in the Constitution Amendment Bill relating to urban local bodies.”

Further the Apex Court observed that in many States,

local bodies have become weak and ineffective on account of variety of reasons, including the failure to hold regular elections, prolonged supersessions and inadequate devolution of powers and functions. As a result, urban local bodies are not able to perform effectively as vibrant democratic units of self-Government. Having regard to these inadequacies, it is considered necessary that provisions relating to urban local bodies are incorporated in the Constitution, particularly for - (i) putting on a firmer footing the relationship between the State Govt. and the Urban Local Bodies with respect to: (a) the functions and taxation powers, and (b) (i) arrangements for revenue sharing, (ii) ensuring regular

conduct of elections, (iii) ensuring timely elections in the case of supersession; and (iv) providing adequate representation for the weaker sections, like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. Accordingly, it has been proposed to add a new Part relating to the Urban Local Bodies in the Constitution to provide for *****(f) fixed tenure of 5 years for the Municipality and re-election within a period of six months of its dissolution.

Under Section 13(1), the duration of the Councils is fixed for a term of five years and every Council shall continue for five years from the date notification for election or nomination under section 12. That election to constitute a Council shall be completed

- (a) before the expiry of its duration specified in or before the expiration of a period of six months from the date of its dissolution. Therefore, the constitutional mandate is that election to a Council shall be completed before the expiry of the five years' period and in case of dissolution and elections have to be conducted in such a manner.

The term of office of Councils has expired in May, 2020 and election has to be held. However, the State Government has taken a decision to keep the ADCs in supersession mode without any stipulated time period which is arbitrary, bias, discriminatory and violate the provisions of Article 14 and 21 of the Constitution. An election to constitute a Coun-

cil shall be completed before the expiration of its duration specified in clause (1) of Section 13 of the Act, 1971. There is a constitutional obligation and mandate to hold election before the term of the Council comes to an end and in our case, it is 01.06.2020.

No reason can be given by the State Government for escaping the mandate of the Constitution. The State Government in the matter has been slack in not taking steps but the State Government is stating difficulties in holding election in time, which cannot be the case having regard to the Constitutional mandate.

(To be contd)