

THE KARENS

The Karens are a group of nomadic people, of whom the Burmese are another, who many centuries ago left their homes in Eastern Tibet and South China and migrated south to the warmer climate and more fertile soil of South-East-Asia.

They arrived and made their settlement in Burma around A.D. 739. G.H. Luce and some Karen historians affirm that by 7th or 8th Century AD, the Karen were already occupying places like the whole lower Burma (the delta area); along the banks of Salween river and the Irrawaddy river, the two main rivers in Burma. They settled there for about a hundred years before the arrival of the Burmese around 825 AD.

Ever since, the Karens appeared to have been a subject race, oppressed by their stronger neighbors and frequently used as slaves. To avoid oppression the Karen lived on hills and remoter parts. They were a subject and despised race. But they remain Karens.

Culturally, “the Karens are open, honest, lacking all guile in their face,” said Ian Morrison in his book, Grandfather Longlegs. (Faber and Faber LTD, 24 Russell Square, London). The Karens have a distinct dress. The men wear a simple Tunic called Te’, the married women a woven sarong and a short tunic, the girls and unmarried women a long white garment like a western nightdress. Most of the Karen history, traditions and cultural identity are handed down, the God-tradition be it oral or written, in poetic forms. Most of the Karens are simple cultivators. The Karens were once known as ‘Star of the East’ which denotes simplicity, honesty, hospitality in traits. The Karens are egalitarian in nature and hence are weak in buying-selling stuff or economic affairs.

Ian Morrison also sated that the Karens are not an intelligent people. They are nothing like as quick-witted as the Burmese or the Chinese “they are often extremely stupid. Like most people who live in the hills or who have been long oppressed, they are reserved. They like to use their own expression, ‘Put a thing in the heart.’ Only when they know a man well will they open their hearts. To a man they know and trust and love they will remain faithful till they die.”

The position of the Karens before the advent of the British was that of a subject race in true orient Fashion. They were treated as slaves; hence, they gradually moved their homes by mountain-side or tracts of land far away from towns and large villages occupied by the Burmese, in Delta.

The Karen God-tradition, so firmly believed in and strongly adhered to, was, that their white brother to whom God temporarily entrusted the golden book, that is the book of God, would one day be brought back to the Karens. So when Andoniram Judson arrived with the golden book i.e., the Bible, there was a big stir among the Karens. Judson gained the first Karen convert to Christianity in Ko Tha Byu by (1828) who wasted no time in spreading the gospel among his people, declaring that the long-lost ‘Book of God’ had been brought back by the white brother, and that the Karen God-tradition had been fulfilled.

When more and more Karens were embracing Christianity, the Burmese proceeded to make life more unbearable for the new converts. Persecution both religions and political began in earnest. Numerous Karens were caught and thrown into prisons, suffering untold agonies, and a few were crucified. One man, by the name of Klaw Meh was nailed to a cross, his abdomen ripped open with intestines hanging down, which the crows were picking while the poor man writhed in agony in an impossible attempt to drive away the crows. His voice gradually grew weaker until at last he died a miserable death, but a martyr on the cross like his master Jesus Christ. His crucifixion took place near a railroad passing between Rangoon and Bassein in a place called Yegy. (Passim, from Burma and the Karens, by Sir San C. po).

The Karen's long harbored anger against the Burmese oppression finally reached its peak and exploded with the birth Karen revolution in 1949, January 31st, a year after the end of British rule in Burma.

The Karen revolution was neither to oppress the Burmese nor to retaliate against what the Burmese have done. It is a self-defense revolution, a defense against ethnic cleansing and what we ask for are 1. The recognition of Karen state must be complete (Statehood). 2. Equality (Burmese one Kyat-Karen one Kyat). 3. We want no racial conflict. 4. We want no civil war. These are the four things which they aim for. But the regime denied all these things by saying, "there is no land for you, not even an inch. If you want the land, fight. The denial of these four things led to a disastrous civil war ever since.

The Karen revolution was once very strong in the beginning capturing almost all the major places and strongholds of the Burmese regime. In fact, the Karen had captured all the important places except the Insein areas which were only 7 miles in measurement. The Karen would have captured all, had they just ignored the faked cease-fire call of U Nu, the then regime leader.

Ba U Gui, our leader was persuaded (forced) to sign the cease-fire agreement against his actual way. In fact, he reluctantly signed the agreement. Taking advantage of the cease-fire, U Nu ordered his troops to surround the Karens up; they quickly brought weapons from India and surprise-attacked Karen to their disadvantage.

Looking at all this, the Burmese regime fail to see from the perspective of the oppressed that their oppressive power drives people away from them, no wonder the Karens sought refuge under the British and fought along side them during the British's occupation of Burma. The rule of the British in Bruma brought a sense of temporary hope to the long oppressed Karens. The Burmese saw this as an unforgivable betrayal. The fact that the Burmese saw the Karens and some other ethnic groups as traitors is a disqualifying prejudice because it is as plain as the law of the jungle that it is natural for those under oppression to seek another power as their alternative security.

Be it as that may, fifty and seven years, under the successive regimes of Burma, rendered us to extreme frustration to the extent of hoping against hope.

Now, we are away from our home land displaced, stateless and basically behind barbed wires. We who were once independent now find ourselves dependent and now living on charity. We have lost our dignity and have become dependent upon others which in many ways degrading and disgraceful. Staying in Thailand as refugees is like running away from a tiger just to find ourselves confronting head-on with another bear which in many ways is no different from the tiger itself.

The UNHCR's leadership in sending people for a third- country resettlement is one of the solutions, and yet this thing does not touch the Karen's root-cause problem. I mean what the Karens need is more than this privilege. They need a land in which they can settle peacefully with freedom and dignity. The Karens, I feel, generally are not opportunistic business people. They seek their destination, not foreign resettlement. Their hope is rooted deep in their belief of the 'Promised Land,' their mother land and not in some utopian third countries.

However, many families left the camp for the third countries' option; many will be leaving as far as my knowledge is concerned. Their reasons of leaving are educations and economics. It looks like many people have lost hope or are in the process of loosing hope in the Karen cause; they don't want to live in a place where they have nothing to live for.

Moreover, more and more people seek to become Thai-citizens by paying some 50,000 Baht or so to some Thai-Karen villagers to acquire the Thai Identity Cards. This thing, too, can dilute our sense of responsibility toward our Karen cause.

The third country resettlement projects may reduce some numbers of people paying taxes to the government of Burma but it undermines the potential of the oppressed as self-defining and self-naming beings. In the struggle for freedom and liberation, what the liberator needs to do is more than plucking an oppressed person out from his or her situation and planting her/him into another utopian situation. The liberators' job is more of teaching them how to fish than supplying them with fish. The liberator's role is to empower them so that they themselves are examples and aspiration for their own liberation. The liberator's approach must be problematization and thus they are to be co-namers of the future of the oppressed.

If those who claim to be liberators merely work *for* refugees and fail to work *with* or fail to conscitize them of their actual need, then, refugee camps can become breeding grounds for bribery and corruption in the process. Hence, the refugees become a target for international projects; and they are not more than objects of advertisement, they are in fact, celebrities pupating on the wrong cause.

Whatever it is, the issue at hand is that Burma needs freedom and those in power now are poor stewards of the country. Burma is decaying and the regime shows no sign of interest to focus on solving the problems.

Let me now leave you here with the present situation of the Karen people.

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