

### ***Let My People Grow 03/2019***

**“ To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.”** Sir Isaac Newton

**“ Survival of the Fittest. ”** Charles Darwin

These two great scientists left their theories to the mankind with a big room of thought. Their thoughts are still applicable and practical to our human society regardless of religion and politics. Very recently I was back on the streets of Rangoon and many places in Burma, my birthplace. People and cars are everywhere in Rangoon. One early morning in June 2019 I was entering main highway bus station around 5 am. The road was jammed with vehicles and people. Both roadsides were overflowed with makeshift stalls, pedestrians and hawkers selling drinking water bottles, fags, mobile phone accessories, garlands and betel quids. Holding the tiffin boxes and extra clothes, many young people in their twenties were rushing for the buses to take them to their factories for the long day work where they earned less than A\$10 a day. But they need to do that by all means.

To get a meagre income they have to work long hours. They need to be the best worker to hold on their jobs. With a purpose I made my way to the latest shopping mall in the heart of Rangoon. I thought I were in one of the latest shopping complex in western world. Everything looks new, bright and shining. I even called my nephew in Perth on messenger. He couldn't believe what he saw. But price printed on every tag of item is no less than Australia. Most items are available on local markets with cheaper prices. On the other hand audio-visual and luxury items are unreachable by the locals. Many unregistered vehicles are running on the roads in Burma.

The most exciting day of Burma was 08<sup>th</sup> June 2019 as the exam result of matriculation announced nationwide. All periodicals and Facebook pages were filled with the comments on the results. Some exam centres revealed “ Zero “ pass while infamous Insein prison got 73% pass. Many Karen churches prepared to honour those who passed with flying colours while ignoring who failed.

I visited many cities and places seeing, learning and talking to people. My guests covered many classes and age-groups of people from different locations and cultures. Surprisingly most periodicals and newspapers are writing and commenting openly on administration, policy and trade. International schools, private schools, institutes, trade and vocational training centres, skilled workers recruitment agencies, banks, export-import companies and petrol stations are mushrooming as private, joint venture and affiliated bodies. Dressed in Burmese costumes some American University students are volunteering in Moulmein in teaching English during their holidays. One retired Karen university lecturer bitterly saying that, “ I've enslaved myself for 34 years teaching as a public servant. Now I'm still teaching at one private school. Do you know that I'm dying of working at one Karen school?”. Our subconscious mind is telling us that we need to establish one Karen school which is long overdue. Present time could be the best time to do so.

Road transport is getting much better. You can get to Myitkyina in far north and Victoria Point ( Kawthaung ) in far south from Rangoon in one day, which was unthinkable in 80s and 90s. As neighbouring India, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand's tourist industries demanding more charges, many tourists are heading towards Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam. Many hotels in Burma are more affordable than Thailand. [ It happened only a few years ago. ] I saw some local pilgrimage vehicles from all parts of Burma almost everywhere I've been. It seems like local and grass-root can spend

more. Some tour companies in Rangoon advertise affordable group tour package trips to Israel, India, Nepal, Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia and Vietnam. Construction sites are everywhere building houses, factories and bridges. Many vehicle companies and showrooms are flourishing in major cities. I saw one Bajaj and Tata [ India Co ] in Mandalay. They build many cars in Burma employing Burmese people. Brand new three-wheelers manufactured in Burma by overseas companies are operating on Burma roads.

Border trading is in practice across India, China and Thai border, but at the mercy of our neighbours. Their products are overflowing in Burma markets but they sometimes refuse to take the goods from Burma. They even freeze the bank accounts of Burmese traders at their own wills. Local government and churches should stand for the justice.

## **Karen vs Current Situation**

### **History**

The day Ko Tha Pyu took baptism on 16 May 1819 is the opening of modern Karen history that made the Karen people known internationally. Before that the name Karen was hardly known and remained in obscurity. History of a nation is not determined by its length but strength. State of Israel was born only in 1948 when Burma was granted independence. Singapore was much later to be born as a nation where no natural drinkable water is available. We all are writing our own history. Collectively we are writing our people's history. We all are equally responsible to make our history beautiful. Maya and Inca civilisation [ 600 B.C- 250 A.D Latin America ] and even its people vanished for a long time. In Burma, Pyu civilisation was such a high one with culture and literature. But they too are gone without a trace. We do have different dialects, religions, customs, taste and political views. But these things should not put us asunder. We've been through many ages, systems, wars, oppression, trials, poverty and disagreements. But luckily we still survive all the odds.

Once Golda Meir said," The mindsets of those who live in better life and those of poverty are not the same." The only remedy for the better mindset is education. [ Nelson Mandela ] To educate our people is our national duty. Chewing betel quids many ex-refugee Karens are walking down the roads in Australia, US and EU as they used to in their villages and refugee camps with untrimmed and uncombed hair. Their mindset is limited. They have no sense of mindful living. But we need to educate our next generation living in Burma as well as those living in western world.

Many Karens living in remote area of Burma are living in cycle of slash and burn farming life. They simply assume that those hills belong to them. They love isolationism and quiet life of hunting the wilds. They do not realise that the world is getting smaller and smaller and the books of law are getting fatter and fatter. We have to prioritise educating our children, training our youngsters in trades and teaching mindful living to the adults. We've been conducting leadership training repeatedly in churches and societies for years. But how is the result? Acceptable? We may need to try the alternatives. Instead of bed-time stories and folklores to the kids we'd substitute true life stories and events. We'd take our kids to the modern cities and shopping centres for a visit to see and feel the taste of modernisation and technology. Rather than monotonous meeting, we'd familiarise our leaders and society with modern ways of gathering, forum, talk-show and workshop. The gap between the haves and the have-nots of our Karen people is getting bigger and bigger. It's good for our leaders, business people, musicians and well-to-dos visiting overseas Karen

communities. Alternatively we'd consider about the grass-root to get up, be trained and follow those with experience to see the world once in their life time.

## **Reality**

During my last visit I shared the idea of vision, learning, training, working, decision-making, goal-setting, capacity building and mindful living with churches, boarding houses and friends in many places. On my way back home at Yangon International airport, I queued together with a group of about 30 young Burmese workers heading to Malaysia. Luckily I talked to 4 young Karen boys of that team. Apparently they knew nothing about vocational trainings provided by the Karen churches and overseas skilled worker recruitment agency.

Right now Burma is under new process of changing primary and secondary education to international level of year 1 to year 12 which is a good sign. That's called skill and employment oriented education system. At the same time our churches and societies need to be ready and prepared for that significant changes, effect and possible consequences. I'm glad to hear that Christian Social Service and Development Department CSSDD and Men's Department are well established under the Karen Baptist Convention. Another good news is Leadership Department also founded Scholarship Team for promising Karen university students. KBC has nearly 2,000 churches in 20 mission circles in Burma. The majority is village churches. Many city churches are equipped with church building, guest house, function hall ( Sunday school facility ) and even vehicles. Some have city mission programme taking care of the sick. Few churches are running pre-primary schooling, day-care centres. Taunggyi Karen Baptist church is planning to operate one Aged home. Apart from God's Glory church no one has church-based business.[ I don't have information on Karen Buddhist society ].

Many Karens from the city are civil servants with meagre and limited salary. Some are tradies. Majority of our rural church members in Burma are village people doing farming, gardening and raising livestock. They work hard. But their produce and products are controlled by weather and bankers. I don't have any information of commercial livestock owners like piggery, deer farm, chicken farm and dairy farm. Some own rubber, durian, mango, coconut, cashew-nut, betel nut estates. Modern farming of machinery and technology is slowly taking shape in Burma. Karen farmers need booster funds to acquire tools, seeds, fertilizer and farming equipment. They have to plough the land with tractors. So they simply borrow the funds ( money ) in advance and pay back with their crops. As a matter of facts they are playing the circle game of debt for many generations. We are responsible. We have to break that chain of that circle game of debt. We may be aware that some sell the crops of their estates / plantations in advance for one to two years as the loan. They take the cash in instalments with heavy interest. In my view Karen individuals, teams or churches should acquire such sales of yearly crop and manage harvesting and marketing. That process could be complicated and lengthy but definitely could ease the wound of unemployment of our people and protect exploitation of the bankers.

Churches are definitely not for the saints but the sinners who are always in need of social, spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual and financial nourishment. Helping hands could be more effective than prayer bands. Let's work hand in hand.