Facets of the North-east

My Pilgrimage to Mc. Mohan Line as a Soldier of Peace Brigade (Shanti Sena)

Lukose Benjamin

When the Chinese committed aggression against India in 1962, it came as a rude jolt to the entire country. It is a different matter that it turned out to be a blessing in disguise, but the country was badly shaken and the region of North-east India was exposed to serious danger. The details of the nightmare are well known and its memory is indelible for those who were present in the North-east India then. Fortunately, the Chinese unilaterally withdrew and returned to the mainland, but it left a deep scar in the psyche of the Indian nation.

Our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was in our midst. There were other stalwarts also in the country then both in political and non-political fields. The people looked at them with expectation and confidence. The Gandhian fraternity also rose to the occasion and decided upon some steps to restore confidence in the minds of the people of the North-east Frontier.

A major initiative which aimed at long term action was to invite volunteers from all over the country to participate in the non-violent peace brigade – the Shanti Sena. Six volunteers offered to come forward and settle for a stipulated period in different parts of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). All except Lukose Benjamin are no more in our midst.* This region (NEFA) now is a full-fledged State of the Indian Union and it is known as Arunachal Pradesh. It was an initiative which truly reflected the Gandhian spirit. The objective set before the Shanti Sainiks (peace soldiers) was to attempt to build non-violent resistance against any future aggression. The names of prominent personalities that come to mind are Late Jayaprakash Narayan, Shri U.N. Dhebar, and Shri Narayan Desai. Narayan Desai was put in charge of the entire project. Fortunately he is still in our midst.

Out of the group of volunteers which were deputed to work in NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh), I have the good fortune of knowing two of them. One is the author of this article Shri Lukose Benjamin. The other prominent personality is one who has made the North-east as his home and established a voluntary social service organization of major proportions and named it Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangh (TAGS). This Shanti Sainik and the founder of TAGS is none other than Shri Ravindra Upadhyaya (popularly known as Ravindra Bhai). He is nearing 90 years of age and continues to be active in service to the poor and the downtrodden.

This article is the story of how Lukose Benjamin came to erstwhile NEFA and started work. He also tells of his recent visit to Arunachal and about his meeting many persons of note who were once students in the schools he and his fellow Shanti Sainiks started then. I now leave it to the reader to read the story of Lukose Benjamin, of his pilgrimage as a soldier of Gandhian peace brigade.

N.Th.
Soon after the Chinese aggression along our northern borders in 1962, representatives of various Gandhian organizations met in November 1962 and decided to organize nonviolent defense on our borders against foreign aggression. This region comprised of more than four lakh square kilometres in area, sheltering more than 25 million people differing in customs, language, religion, etc. A border area co-ordination committee consisting of Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, Gandhi Peace Foundation, Shanti Sena Mandal, Adimjati Sevak Sangh, Harijan Sevak Sangh, Kasturba Trust, Khadi and Village Industries Commission, and Sarva Seva Sangh was constituted.

Kerala Gandhi Smarak Nidhi had also decided in its annual conference of workers held at N. Parur near Alwaye (Kerala) in December 1962, to send its workers for border area work. I had volunteered for this work, and underwent a formal training conducted by the Akhil Bharat Shanti Sena Mandal at Pattikallan (Haryana) under the leadership of Shri Narayan Desai and Shri Om Prakash Trikha. I was assigned to work in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) which is now known as Arunachal Pradesh. NEFA at that time was administered by the Ministry of External Affairs through an Adviser to the Governor of Assam with his headquarters at Shillong, which was the capital of Assam in those days.

After the border area training camp, I spent a few days at Shanti Sena HQ at Varanasi. During this sojourn I got an opportunity to acquaint myself with senior Gandhians like Sankar Rao Dev ji, Radhakrishna ji, Dattoba ji, Sastri ji, Ravindra Bhai (Upadhyaya), Rambhooshan, etc., in addition to the workers in the ABSS office and the workers in Gandhian Institute of Studies founded by Lok Nayak Jai Prakash ji and functioning on ABSS Campus.

The border area co-ordination committee set up a network of 175 centres covering almost all the frontiers of the country. Five hundred workers from different Gandhian organizations were trained and deputed to work in these areas and run the centres. The frontier had been divided into two regions: Eastern Sector and Western Sector, comprising of Assam, Nagaland, NEFA, Tripura (Eastern Sector), and Uttarakhand in UP, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and Kutch in Gujarat (Western
Out of 175 centres, 26 were those of Gandhi Smarak Nidhi. The central Gandhi Smarak Nidhi had accepted to meet the entire expense for all the centres in NEFA.

**Aggression and Aftermath in NEFA**

During the Chinese aggression of 1962, the Chinese soldiers entered through the border check posts situated at Gelling, Taksing, and Limeking passes. These check posts were poorly manned and ill equipped. Hence, the Chinese Army which came in large numbers like a flood could easily overpower the check posts. The Indian *jawans* had no other alternative than to vacate and withdraw at a great speed. Many of them died by falling into the deep ravines while escaping from the invading Army. The superstitious people of the border area used to tell many tales of woe in this connection. They told of hearing often the cries of *jawans* calling for water, and the ghosts of *jawans* dropping from the sky on moonlit nights and conducting parades and marches. When the civil administration and Army returned after the ceasefire (the unilateral declaration by the Chinese), many dead bodies and skeletons of *jawans* were recovered and identified with the help of the metallic badges on their uniforms. Many dead bodies were eaten by jackals and vultures leaving only the skeletons behind. These and many other stories were told to us when we visited those areas.

During their occupation of the area for almost one month, the Chinese had tried their best to brainwash the border people against India. The situation in NEFA in late 1962 and 1963 was a delicate one. During the Chinese aggression, the Army and civil administration had completely abandoned the NEFA region leaving the people at the mercy of the Chinese Army. The invaders used the opportunity to brainwash the NEFA people and cultivate close rapport with them. They took special care to see that no hardship was caused to the people during the occupation. Whatever services were rendered by the people was amply remunerated for. They even helped the local people in their fields and joined them in the ponoong dance, drank apong (rice beer) with them and thus completely identified themselves with them.

When the civil administration and Army returned after the ceasefire, the people of NEFA harboured reservations. Many of them even considered that the invasion was a matter between China and India in which they had no part. It was quite natural because during the crisis, the people of NEFA were forsaken. So there was suspicion and distrust on both sides. Besides, there is also the fact of physical resemblance between the Chinese and the people of NEFA. Both share Mongoloid features.
The immediate mission of the Shanti Sena centres was to regain the trust and confidence of the NEFA people, to convince them that they were part and parcel of India and that their well being in all respects lay with India. Another objective was to prepare them for non-violent defence in case of any future aggression. The chief object of our programmes was to enlighten the people of the border area to their own capacity and motivate them to resort to non-violent resistance to aggression. The borders can remain secure only if the people inhabiting the region realized that they were part of a big family or Indian nation. The main thrust of our work was to break the isolation of the people in the border areas by opening centres of services which will enable them to get into close touch with the rest of the country. Building up a high morale of the people in the region was also an important concern. This was to be achieved by convincing the people that the entire nation was with them.

From Varanasi, I commenced my maiden journey to the North-east via Katihar, Guwahati and Dibrugarh by train and from Mohanbari Airport I took flight to Tuting landing ground by Kalinga Airlines. The administration used to arrange free air travel for Shanti Sainiks by Kalinga Airlines along with NEFA officials, Army personnel and special police personnel. It was a transport-cum-passenger service. Air dropping of food articles, etc., was also done by these flights. They had done the food dropping service for the retreating Army during the aggression also. I met the Assistant Political Officer Major K.S. Puri and had a detailed discussion with him regarding our proposed plan of work. He assured his help and cooperation in all possible ways. After staying for a few days at Tuting and getting acquainted with the officials there who helped me with necessary information about the people and their ways of life, etc., I proceeded to Paling village where we had to organize Shanti Sena activities. Sri Bhramar Soni deputed by Rajasthan Gandhi Smarak Nidhi also joined me at Tuting. After a march of three days, we reached Paling accompanied by a language interpreter (Kotoki) and ALC (administration’s luggage carrier) porters after two halts on the way at Inking and Sinking villages.

At the village border in Paling, we were received by the villagers under the leadership of Gaon Buras in their traditional style with reception songs and Apong and boiled eggs. I still remember the lines of their welcome song “Migame Kalanka Ek Ghanda Salam Komupiye” meaning “Honorable Guest, please listen, we are giving you a heartfelt welcome.” The people of that region belonged to the “Adi” tribe. We were introduced by the Kotoki to the villagers as VIPs sent by the ‘Betane’ Migum (P.M.) from Delhi for the welfare of the NEFA people. The villagers had already constructed a house in traditional style on a
platform fixed on stakes for our stay. Two other buildings in the similar style were also provided for school and other activities.

As per instructions of the Kotoki, a kebang (village assembly) was convened in their Kebang ghar in the evening, during which we explained the objective of our coming over there and the nature of the activities that we intended to start among them. The villagers began to speak one after another after the speech of the Gaon Bura. They all expressed their desire for starting a school in their village and welcomed our presence in their midst. We agreed to start a school, and they decided who would study in the school and selected the children then and there. Thus we started our work with a school for the children. The villagers were greatly pleased to learn about a school functioning in their village. At that time there was only one boy named Neem Pyang studying in Tuting (Sub divisional HQ) at a distance of three days march from their village.

Thirty children including two girls from Paling and neighbouring villages attended the classes. Appun, Sunin, Makan, Namsing, Sing Sonam are some of the names I still remember. We conducted the school as a non-formal education centre. Literature, numbers, music, drawing, gardening, games, picnics, cultural programmes were in the curriculum. We conducted an adult education centre after nightfall. The elders of both sex attended the night classes.

A first aid centre was also run by us. We used to stock ointments for skin diseases, eye drops, ear drops, iodine, benzoine and simple medicines (tablets, capsules, etc.) which were safe, having no side effects. At a time when even a drop of iodine was not available in the village, this was a big affair. The only medical care they used to get was on the occasion of the annual visit of a doctor from the Sub District HQ, Tuting. My teaching experience in an higher secondary school from 1950-54 and acquaintance with clinical work in Kerala Gandhi Smarak Nidhi District center Mararikulam (Alleppey District), where I had established a Rural Health Centre, proved to be of much help. In Mararikulam I had to sit with the medical officer and function as a translator as the doctors were all non-Keralites. Thus during that period I had managed to acquire sufficient practical and theoretical knowledge in first aid and treatment for minor ailments.

Even after 45 years I remember very clearly the old men and women coming early in the morning to our quarters and telling us “Akikidung.” Akikidung meant, “eye disease, stomach pain,” etc. When they got relief they used to express their gratitude. Even if we objected, they used to present vegetables, tubers, eggs, etc., occasionally.
In the night, the youngsters, both adolescent boys and girls, assembled in the Kebang Ghar for singing and dancing. Drinking Apong (local liquor with little percentage of alcohol) was an essential part of the night revelry.

After four months, Bhramar Soni had to leave the centre on account of his family problems, and one Shri Giridharilal Kakker from Meerut and Shri Hansraj Patel from Sanosara (Gujarat) joined the centre. Hansraj being a diploma holder in agriculture and Veterinary Science, his presence was helpful in extending our work in the field of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry.

In the afternoon, between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m., we used to organize games and sports for the village children. The children really enjoyed that. Kabady and other indigenous games were introduced.

Participation in the Kebang was an interesting activity for us. We began speaking about Panchayat Raj only in the 1980s, but these people were practicing the same from time immemorial in right earnest. Disputes and cases were settled in one sitting. There used to be always a unanimous decision after several hours of talking, discussion, arguments, etc. Their oratory skill was simply fantastic with actions and change in voice pitch. It was a histrionic performance par excellence. The Kebang always started and ended with drinking of apong.

Leaving Paling for Muri-Mugli in Subansiri District

After one year in Paling, I left for Muri-Mugli in the Upper Subansiri District where I was joined by Shri Rama Chandra Panicker, who was a colleague of mine in Kerala Gandhi Smarak Nidhi. He was a trained pharmacist with ample experience in hospitals. From Mohanbari Airport we took a Kalinga plane flight to Daparijog in January 1965. After spending a week at HQ, we proceeded to Muri village, which is again three days march from Daporijog. The people in that region were Hill Miris. The new political officer Shri P.P. Shrivastav who replaced Shri M.D. Tyagi, also came with us for his official visit to Muri-Mugli village. The Shanti Sainiks there, Mr. Mallikarjuna Rao and Dev Rao Patel were to be relieved by us. The villagers of Muri-Mugli and nearby villages up to Lamdak assembled at Muri-Mugli village to welcome the new political officer. A grand assembly was also convened by the new political officer. The Political Officer Sahib (Present DC) was kind enough to introduce us to the assembly of leaders and elders from the region and he asked them to render all cooperation in our activities. He highly praised the Shanti Sena movement and activities. Thus we received a very welcome start in the area for our work.
Here also we concentrated our activities in the field of health, education, adult literacy and social education with stress on national integration. Since my colleague was a trained health worker, we started a regular clinic with the help of the administration. The villagers constructed a separate building for the clinic in addition to our residential quarters, the hostel building and school buildings. Our schoolwork was streamlined and got duly recognized by the administration, and arrangements were made to admit children from the 1st to the 4th standard. The children from villages other than Muri-Mugli were accommodated in the hostel. The administration provided uniforms and learning materials. The children brought their own ration (rice and vegetables) from their house and cooked in the common kitchen. Children from six villages in all attended the school. Besides the regular syllabus, much importance was given to extracurricular activities which were conducted regularly. Sports and games, gardening, cultural programmes, picnics, singing national songs, etc., were systematically planned and conducted.

In 1965, an All India Shanti Sena Camp was conducted under the guidance of Shri Narayan Desai in Arunachal (then NEFA). The entire expenditure (food and arrangements) for the camp was met by the district administration. Shanti Sainiks from all over India participated in the camp. The political officer and his senior officials also participated in the one-week camp. The camp was inaugurated by the Adviser to the Governor of Assam (ADGA) Colonel K.A. Raja, who became the first Governor when full Statehood was conferred to NEFA. The camp was a morale booster for our activities.

Regular house visits in the village was one of our important activities. We visited neighbouring villages also for medical work and treated patients. Medical work was a felt need of the area. Shri Gopinathan, a trained health worker from Kerala who was working in a Gandhi Smarak Nidhi centre joined Muri-Mugli centre in 1965. His presence was really helpful for the further development of medical work in the area. With his vast experience as also enthusiasm, we could extend our medical work to other villages also. The number of patients in the clinic increased. Shri Gopinathan was an all rounder. He was teaching in the school also. House visits were made more regular and frequent.

In response to the request of the DC Anini, Sri I.P. Gupta, it was decided to open a Shanti Kendra in the extreme northern border area of Anini District of Lohit Division. We were directed by A.B. Shanti Sena Mandal to go over there to start work. Mr Gopinathan, Inder Singh Sajwan of Garhwal and myself proceeded to Anini at the beginning of 1966. The
village Burango where we started work was just adjacent to the Mc. Mohan border line known by the name of the British Foreign Secretary Sir Henry Mc. Mohan who was instrumental in signing a treaty with Tibetan authorities demarcating the boundary line between India and Tibet in 1914, at Shimla. This was after the fall of the Manchu Dynasty rule in China. China at that time, however, had not signed the treaty. The village we went to, Burango, was on the bank of the river Burango which came from Tibet. There was no human habitation beyond that village. The people of that area belonged to the Chulikatta Mishimi tribe.

As in the earlier two places (Paling in Siang Division and Muri-Mughli in Subansiri), we started work with focus on education, health, adult literacy, social education, village visits, etc. The villagers constructed buildings for our residence, school, clinic, etc., and their response was cordial and helpful. Our clinic became very popular in that extremely inaccessible area on the border. The hospital at the district HQ was three days march from the village. As such even the outposts of the Army and special police force used to make use of the service of our trained health worker in emergency situations when their health staff was on leave. Our schools became very popular and children from half a dozen villages attended the school.

In 1967 March, I left NEFA for Kerala and joined Kerala Gandhi Smarak Nidhi after my deputation period for NEFA work was over.

Looking back, I feel elated to see that the ill-clad little children who came to our school in Paling, Muri-Mugli and Burango continued their education and rose to occupy eminent positions in administration and politics. Some of them are M.L.A.s and ministers and party presidents.

Talo Mugli - three time Minister and President, Arunachal Pradesh Congress; Eru Muri - Chief Engineer P.W.D.; Tirin Dapke - Director, D.R.D.A.; Tulum Babla - a leading politician after taking M.A. in Political Science from Delhi University, and others, were some of our school children who rose to prominence.

The above were some of the persons whom I visited in 2003 after 41 years of my first visit to NEFA as Shanti Sainik. Also, it is noteworthy to mention here that the next generation of these friends are also now high officials in NEFA administration.

* These six volunteers were Bhramar Soni from Rajasthan, Mallikarjina Rao from Hyderabad, Dev Rao Patel from Nagpur, Giridhari Lal Kakkar from Merrut, Ram Swaroop Rai from Bihar, and Lukose Benjamin from Kerala.
MY MASTER

This is the message of Shri Ramakrishna to the modern world: “Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality; and the more this is developed in a man, the more powerful is he for good. Earn that first, acquire that, and criticise no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realisation. Only those can understand who have felt. Only those who have attained to spirituality can communicate it to others, can be great teachers of mankind. They alone are the powers of light.”

The more such men are produced in a country, the more that country will be raised; and that country where such men absolutely do not exist is simply doomed, nothing can save it. Therefore my Master’s message to mankind is: “Be spiritual and realise truth for yourself.”

— Swami Vivekananda